

Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 4

Shouji Gatou

VISIT...

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#04



Amagi Brilliant Park

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AMAGIBRILLIANTPARK
WELCOME TO AQUARIO!

**THANKS FOR COMING
TO SEE US, EVERYONE!**

(It always seems to be the same people...)

**I CAN FEEL THE
PEOPLE IN THE FRONT
ROW STARING AT ME.**

... (posts tweet)

**THE WIND
IS SPEAKING
TO ME...
...HAHHH!!**

**UM... COULD I HAVE
SUNDAY OFF TO GO
TO A TRADE SHOW?**

**WHEN ARE YOU PEOPLE
STARTING THE SHOW?**



Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Bando Biino's Extraordinary Circumstances

Let's Film a Promotional Video!

Family Affair

Five-Man Meeting (At Savage, A Yakitori Bar)

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Bando Biino's Extraordinary Circumstances

"I know I always say this, but... I'm so sorry, Biino," said Bando Biino's father, from where he lay on his flimsy, hard-worn futon. "If only I were a stronger man, you wouldn't have to work so hard..."

"Dad, you promised not to say that stuff, remember? Here, I made you rice porridge." Biino smiled kindly. She set the freshly made porridge next to the futon and helped her father, who was suddenly seized by a coughing fit, to sit up.

It was a cheap, 30-year-old apartment building on the outskirts of Amagi City. Wind blew in through the gaps in the windows; the slightest shift of weight caused the floorboards to squeak. The tatami mats were old and thick with the smells of years past, and there were dark stains on the ceilings.

They had moved here six months ago. There was no real furniture. One of the burners in the kitchen had broken down, and the water heater had never worked from the start.

"Our neighbor gave me some of their fresh-picked eggplant today," said Biino. "I boiled it nice and soft, so eat up, okay?"

"Yes... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Biino." He gripped the spoon in his frail hand and slurped up the rice porridge. His movements were weak. His fingers were trembling.

Once... Once, her father had been a Wall Street power broker, moving tens of millions of dollars per day, jet-setting around the world shouting "Buy!" and "Sell!" into his phone. That father, who had once raked up money from stupid clients, who had made the poor weep, who had lived in a penthouse apartment with a Central Park view, who had hosted parties for dozens of clients each week, who had driven around in a Ferrari that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars... Now he was as thin as a rail, living in an apartment like a poorhouse from a period drama, sleeping all day and depending on her! Slurping down rice porridge with chunks of boiled eggplant! Whispering to her things like "Ahh... It's delicious...!"

Tears spilled from the corners of her father's eyes. It was a scene like out of a TV melodrama. There weren't many men out there who could cry like this— those that could certainly didn't work on Wall Street.

Ahh, what is the nature of happiness? As her thoughts drifted to more profound questions, Bando Biino looked at the clock in the

room. "Uh-oh. I've got to get to my job."

"Of course... of course... how are things at the cafe?" her father asked.

"I got fired from the cafe," Biino admitted.

"Ahh, I see... now it's the hamburger place, right?"

"I got fired from the hamburger place."

"Um... where was it, then?" he foundered on. "Oh, yes... the paper route."

"Fired from that, too," Biino sighed.

She'd also been fired from the family restaurant, the convenience store, the bento shop, and the pizza delivery joint. She was doing everything within her power to succeed, but none of her jobs ever seemed to last. Still, she couldn't afford to get down in the dumps. She had to find a way to graduate from high school while working hard and making money, then find a proper career and become an amazing breadwinner for her family! ...Such as it was, anyway, since her mother had run off with another man, her big brother was in a mental institution, and her little brother had been sent to live with distant relatives.

"I'm so sorry, Biino..." her father apologized. "I can't even keep track of where you're working..."

"It's okay, Dad," she reassured him. "I'll just tell you: I'm working at an amusement park right now."

"Oh, an amusement park?"

"Yeah. It's Amagi Brilliant Park! I already made trouble for them at the interview, but they still hired me, you know? They're very nice people, so don't worry about it!"

"Yes. Yes..."

"Anyway, that's where I'm working today. I left lunch and water next to your pillow. See you later, okay?" she said with a bright smile, then left the cheap apartment behind. Just as she reached the bottom of the creaking stairway, she ran into the Landlady. She was an old lady in her 80s, but her posture was ramrod straight.

"Bando-san," the Landlady said.

"Ah, Ms. Landlady... good morning!"

The Landlady blocked Biino's way, her eyes narrowed and lips twisted in a scowl. "Don't 'good morning' me. Where is last month's rent?"

"Huh? I've been paying my rent every month on time..." Biino told her.

"You wicked child! You think you can lie right to my face?! I've got a sharper mind than you think! You can't fool me just because I'm an old lady!"

"Ah, um, but I paid it in full... Oh, I know! The receipt you gave

me last week..."

She hurriedly pulled the receipt from deep in her bag. The Landlady snatched it from her hands and tore it into pieces right before her eyes.

"Ah..."

"Forgery!" the Landlady screamed at her, spittle flying.

"Ms. Landlady, please!" Biino begged.

Six months ago, when they had first moved in, the Landlady had been a kind, on-the-ball woman who had cried when she'd heard Biino's family situation. She really had been late with the rent a few times, but when that happened, the Landlady had simply laughed and said, "Don't worry, Biino-chan. Half the rooms in this rotten place are empty anyway!"

But recently, her attitude had taken a sharp turn. If Biino turned in the rent by the due date, she wouldn't say anything kind; she'd just grumble. Sometimes, like now, she'd insist she hadn't really paid it.

"I-I don't know what to do," Biino stammered. "Please calm down, Ms. Landlady. There must be some kind of misunderstanding..."

"This is part of some scheme of yours, isn't it?" the Landlady accused, "Yes, that's got to be it! I thought you were a good girl at first... but you're a vixen at heart! You're trying to seduce my husband and my sons when I'm not looking, aren't you?!"

"N-No, certainly not!" Biino objected. "Um, I've never even met your sons!"

"You liar! I know the truth! You act all innocent, but it's just a facade!" The Landlady ranted. "You can't fool me, you understand?!"

"That's not true. I..." Biino looked at her watch. It was a Hermes watch her father had bought for her, back when they were wealthy. It was really too much for her now, but it was the one thing she couldn't bear to take to the pawn shop.

"Oh no, oh no! I'm going to be late," Biino panicked. "We can talk about the rent later!"

"Wait!" the Landlady fumed.

"Sorry!" Biino told her. "I need to go!"

The landlady grabbed for her, but she fled past, then ran to her scooter. It was a Yamaha Vino that was over ten years old, which she'd managed to acquire for next to nothing. It was like a faithful dog to her, with its charming, curvy design.

Boarding complete! Taking off!

"Wait, Bando-san!" the Landlady screamed after her, but Biino just put on speed. She raced as fast as she could until the voice faded into the distance. Once she made it to work, she thought, she could forget about this everyday stuff. Even if it was just a brief respite...

On Saturdays, Kanie Seiya took his bike to the park. It was a long,

exhausting uphill ride to the employee gate. He was the park's acting manager—the top position in Amagi Brilliant Park—and while he knew it was a bit unbecoming for someone in his position to pant his way to work on a bike, he wanted to avoid using the buses where possible. After all, his wage was only 850 yen per hour—the minimum wage for metropolitan Tokyo—with no paid overtime.

What kind of world is this where a manager makes that as his own wage? he wondered sometimes. But because of the park's financial woes, he didn't want to waste a single yen. Besides, if he paid *himself* that wage, it made it harder for the other members of the cast to complain about what he paid *them*. Therefore, riding his bike to work was the right move on every front!

"Whew... whew..." He wheezed through the employee gate, then parked his bike in the lot next to the general affairs building. Just as he got it chained up, he heard a loud screech of brakes behind him. "...?!"

He turned back and saw what had happened: A delivery truck had gotten into an accident with a scooter. The truck's driver got out of his cab, face pale. The unoccupied scooter lay in the middle of the road; its rider lay prone on the ground, a short distance away.

"Hey, are you okay?!" Seiya shouted, running up to the rider before the panicking truck driver could.

"Y-Yeah... Sorry. Sorry..." The bike's rider picked herself up and shakily took off her helmet. It was Bando Biino, a part-time worker they'd hired in April. She looked up at Seiya and blinked her large eyes in surprise. "Oh... good morning, Kanie-san."

"Huh? Oh..." said Seiya, bewildered.

"I... I guess I was a little careless," Biino admitted. "Um, I'm fine, though! T-Totally A-OK!"

"Uh, but... You seem to be bleeding a lot..." Seiya observed. Something seemed to have cracked through her helmet, and blood was trickling down from her temple. Still, Biino just smiled brightly at him.

It was only when Seiya pointed it out that Biino finally noticed she was bleeding. "Huh? What? Um... sorry! It'll dry, okay? It's not that bad; it'll dry right away!"

"Uh, I'm not worried about whether it'll dry or—" he tried to explain.

"Anyway, I'm fine!" Biino told him brightly. "I just can't be late! I'll c-clean up my scooter later, but I need to get to work first!"

"Uh, I should probably call an ambul—"

"Don't need one! Really, sorry for the trouble! Bye! Bye..." Biino started to walk away, but her gait was uneasy. Fresh drops of blood scattered across the asphalt.

Should I stop her, Seiya wondered, *or let her go?* While Seiya and truck driver watched in awe, she took four steps, five steps...

“B... Blugh...”

...And then she fell over.

“Augh!” Seiya yelled, “That’s why I said you need an ambulance...”

“P-Please... no... You’ve helped me out so many times. I can’t be a burden to the park...” Biino said, her blood-stained fingertips trembling.

“Then at least go to the infirmary!” he told her. “Come on, get a grip!”

“Sorry... Sorry...”

With the truck driver’s help, Seiya picked her up.



Despite her terrible accident that morning, Bando Biino was back at work before noon. She'd lost a shocking amount of blood, but she was still a tough girl. Normally, they would have sent her to a hospital to have a full set of scans done, but she staunchly refused the offer and threw herself back into her work.

"Head injuries are no laughing matter, you know," said Sento Isuzu, Seiya's secretary, after he explained what had happened. They were both in the underground passage, dressed in street clothes, and heading towards the onstage area to do some surprise inspections.

"Subarachnoid hemorrhaging and the like," Isuzu continued. "I hope she won't go home tonight, suddenly take ill, and collapse. It might cause her bereaved guardian to come by later, ask why we didn't send her to the hospital right away, and sue us."

"Well... I know you're right," Seiya agreed helplessly. "She just intimidated me somehow..."

"..... I've been wondering this for a while. Why are you so timid around Bando-san?" Isuzu asked, peering at him intently. There was no sign of jealousy or suspicion there; she seemed genuinely confused about his treatment of Biino.

"I wouldn't say I'm timid... well, maybe I am," Seiya said haltingly. "Hmm... I'm not sure how to put it. She just..."

It was Seiya who had decided to accept her application, in the end, and now he was starting to regret it. He still didn't know much about her: She went to an all-girls school in Amagi City (a different school from his, of course); she had a lively, cheerful personality, and she was more passionate about her work than most; she was great with the guests.

She hadn't objected at all when she learned the strange fact that Seiya, her peer, was the park's acting manager. She'd also readily accepted the fact that the park's cast were (mostly) genuine fairies from a "magical realm," and she hadn't told anyone about it, either.

She was good looking, too, and curvy. She had an aura that just seemed to charm everyone around her. And not just men, either—it was more of an all-ages charm; something that appealed to women and children, too. It was enough that Seiya was considering using her in an idol-like role for park PR. She was, quite frankly, a diamond in the rough. But despite all that...

"She just keeps bleeding!" he sighed.

"Yes. I see..." Isuzu nodded, as if that explained everything.

"She was bleeding the day of her first interview, then she came to the orientation and tore the wound open again. And there's always bloodshed going on around her attraction... I just... No matter what... I can't help but want to get away from her all the time!" he finished.

"But Kanie-kun," Isuzu pointed out, "every person has flaws."

"That's one flaw I can't handle," he grumbled.

"And at the moment, no guests have been injured..." Isuzu continued persuasively.

"By the time they have been," he objected, "it'll be too late!"

"But we can still keep her on staff, can't we?" Isuzu wanted to know.

"Ah, yeah. Yeah... I guess we can."

That was right. Seiya didn't have time to rack his brain over a single part-time worker; his job right now was getting people to the park. He passed through the door of exit A3, the door for employees coming and going from one of the park's five areas, Sorcerer's Hill. It was around noon, on a Saturday.

As for the number of guests currently visible onstage—yes, it wasn't bad at all. In fact, it was quite a bit better than he'd expected. Cheerful music played from the park's speakers. The guests looked cheerful as they came and went. There were even lines for the few attractions he could see!

"Things seem to be going well," Isuzu (who had come along with him to observe) said, with some slight cheer in her voice.

Their recent series of improvements did seem to be pulling in the guests. Part of that was the attraction renovations, of course, but the live show they'd started during Golden Week had also gotten rave reviews.

Especially the live show. Moffle and the others had certainly worked hard, but it was the show's villain, the red dragon Rubrum, who had really gotten people talking. He was intimidating in a way that couldn't be explained with mere holography or giant props. The children cried, the parents raged...

But mostly, the customers cheered with joy, and the resultant word-of-mouth had been drawing people in since the end of Golden Week. It was good enough that some foreign special effects studios were coming by to ask questions.

They'd also received some complaints from Maple Land that using a dragon in a performance was crossing a line, but Seiya didn't care. He had to use every resource at his disposal. Looking just at this month's numbers, attendance was at least 350% of last year. That was three and a half times greater!

Of course, that was just because last year's numbers had so been pathetic; their new target of three million was still completely unrealistic at this rate.

"Attendance is increasing steadily, week by week. May's second week drew in about 30,000, and its third week about 35,000. The fourth was about 42,000. If I plot this growth on a graph..." Isuzu fiddled with her tablet, then revealed a simple line graph. "By next

March, we should be drawing 10 million people to the park per week.”

“What’s that a chart of?” Seiya asked. “A killer virus pandemic?” Even zombies in the horror movies multiplied at a slower rate than that.

“It’s just a simple calculation. It doesn’t make you feel better?” Isuzu was probably trying to cheer him up in her own way, but thoughts of attendance couldn’t do anything but depress him.

It was true that attendance was trending upwards. No, it wasn’t just trending—it was rising, and rising fast, at that. Its speed was enough to surprise even Seiya (even though of course, it had been his intention). They might even reach last year’s attendance quota before summer break was over— but it still wouldn’t be enough to bring them to three million.

“..... We can think about it later,” he told her. “First, let’s run our inspection.”

“Mm. Ah... of course,” Isuzu agreed.

Seiya shifted gears and walked around Sorcerer’s Hill with her. It was bustling all over with guests. As acting manager, he would be performing surprise inspections. Were there any issues with the cast’s customer service? Any lapses in safety precautions? Any places that weren’t getting properly cleaned? He’d be like the villainous mother-in-law in a daytime drama, stingily checking every fine detail.

“Did you see any problems?” Isuzu asked after they’d had a look around.

Seiya fell deep into thought. “Hmm...” He hadn’t, really. Thanks to his repeatedly telling the cast how to do things these past three months, most of the major problems had finally been eliminated. That was a great thing, but being unable to say anything made him feel like he wasn’t really doing his job, which put him in a black mood anyway.

Isuzu, perhaps picking up on his feelings, spoke with a composed expression. “I think everyone’s worked very hard.”

“Hmm... well, that’s true,” he admitted reluctantly. Nitpicking things just for their own sake wouldn’t help anyone. Maybe he needed to offer praise where appropriate, too.

“Now we have to visit the attractions,” she told him. “Shall we?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Let’s have a look.”

They headed for the newly renovated Moffle’s House of Sweets. On Moffle’s insistence (and under the pretense that it was “for a limited time”), its whimsical world had been shifted to one of action horror—a move which had proven to be surprisingly popular. You were under attack by evil and hostile “naughty mice,” which you could face with a wide variety of extremely realistic and substantial

weapons. It combined a variety of sound and lighting elements, and more game-like elements seemed to be added every day.

It wasn't just superficial horror, either. It was seriously hardcore; intense enough to be traumatic for preschoolers, while teens found it thoroughly thrilling. People loved it. Word about Moffle's House of Sweets had already spread, and the wait in the queue had grown to an hour long.

"Well, fumo? Well, fumo?" In between guest interactions, Moffle walked to Seiya, grinning. He used to dress up like a patisserie, but now he was dressed like a field commander, complete with a bulletproof vest and ammo belt.

"The renovation's a huge success, fumo," Moffle continued. "Look at that line of guests! Hmm, I forget, who fought the renovation again? Who was it again? Who was it again?"

"Ugh..." Seiya groaned. Of course, he was the one who had fought against it. In the end, though, he'd still given the renovations his stamp of approval, so he wished the rat would show a little gratitude. *Show some gratitude, rat!* he screamed internally. But starting a fight here wouldn't do any good, so...

"...I'm glad that people like it," Seiya said, from between clenched teeth. "But we need to start thinking about guest turnover. When we hit July, the lines will grow to be more than an hour long. We'll need to find a way to speed them through the shooting range, right?"

"Moffu... well... hmm. That's true, fumo... I'll think about it, fumo." His feeling of superiority extinguished, Moffle folded his arms and sank into thought. He could be surprisingly earnest when it came to things like this.

"Think it over in time for next week's meeting, okay?" Seiya requested.

"Roger, fumo," the mascot replied.

"Moffle-san! The guests from Group B will be entering Hamburger Hall in one minute! Get ready!" Chujo Shiina's voice echoed from the greenroom speaker. She was a part-time worker who served as Moffle's assistant.

"Roger that, fumo."

The guest group reaching the end of the attraction was about to engage in the fierce battle of its final room, Hamburger Hall. Moffle would dash in like a whirlwind, clear out a regiment of naughty mice, then rally the guests against the final boss, Naughty Mouse Overlord.

It all felt a bit inexplicable to Seiya, but for some reason, people liked that too. "...I've been meaning to ask," he said. "Why does the House of Sweets have a Hamburger Hall?"

"It's part of the backstory, fumo," Moffle explained. "It earned the name because even veteran soldiers say, 'this room will make

hamburger of us.' It adds to the verisimilitude."

"It feels like bad taste," Seiya commented.

"Well, I can't expect a boy like you to understand. It's very cool and gritty, fumo."

"Is it really?" Seiya wanted to know.

"Well, I should be going. I've got to fight the overlord for the tenth time today, fumo." Moffle scooped up a heavy looking machine gun (probably an M2) and wielded it recklessly as he ran out of the greenroom.

"I hope none of the guests gets hurt..." Seiya muttered.

The previously silent Isuzu spoke. "It's still just a laser gun," she told him. "I'm sure it will be fine."

"I guess. ...Even so."

"What?"

"I thought this geeky renovation would be a huge problem," Seiya admitted. "I'm honestly surprised it's so popular."

Isuzu tilted her head. "I agree that it's geeky. But why would that a problem?"

"If you're dealing with a limited audience, you suit your product to that audience," Seiya explained. "If you're dealing with boys under five, you do train stuff and superheroes. If you're dealing with girls of that age, you do henshin idols. But high school couples, who are coming to have fun on a date, will find both of those things boring."

It was one thing for manga, anime, and games to have specialized audiences, but this was an amusement park: They had to accommodate people of all age groups. Targeting a particular subgroup would make it harder to please the others.

"So in theory, you should make things to appeal to a variety of age groups, right?" he asked.

"...You may be right," Isuzu concluded thoughtfully.

"The reason I was against Moffle's proposed renovation was because it targeted a limited audience. The naughty mice are now grotesque; you're fighting them with vivid, lifelike weapons... I mean, personally, I think I'd enjoy it; I'm young, and I like modern video games," Seiya said. "But families and dating couples can't possibly enjoy it. They'll just find it dark and stultifying."

"I'm not so sure," Isuzu argued. "I saw a number of dating couples and families in that line. It seems like they really do enjoy the renovation that Moffle came up with."

"You think they enjoy shooting mice and watching them scream?" Seiya wanted to know.

"No, that's not the part that they enjoy. It's... how to put it..." Isuzu put a fingertip to her chin and thought. She didn't seem certain about it herself. "It's hard to say... I think it's the fact that Lord Moffle

is being faithful to what he truly enjoys. The guests pick up on that enthusiasm.”

“That’s drivell,” Seiya countered immediately, though he wasn’t sure why he was so annoyed about it, himself. “That kind of starry-eyed optimism won’t bring in guests. Please. Just because *he* enjoys it? If that was all it took to attract guests, no one would ever have a problem.” He let out a bitter laugh. “...What?”

“Nothing,” said Isuzu, scowling as she peered into his face. “I just found it strange.”

“...?” Seiya waited for her to continue.

“Do you remember? Long ago, when I brought you to this park, you said, ‘If you want to make people dream, first, you need to believe in that dream.’ That was the first time I ever really believed in you,” Isuzu told him, “for reasons besides the revelation.”

“.....” He wasn’t sure how to respond.

“But now you’re saying the exact opposite,” Isuzu remarked.

Her words had taken him aback. It didn’t feel like she’d hit him below the belt; it was more like getting a diagnosis of serious illness from your doctor.

“At the very least, Moffle believes in the dream he’s bringing his guests, and the same goes for the others,” she told him. “But you—the person who should believe in that most of all—seem to have stopped believing in it.”

“That’s...” *That’s because I’m acting manager now*, Seiya thought. *I’m not an outsider like I was then. Bringing three million people to this park in a year—that’s my responsibility now. I can’t afford to be so idealistic—* Maybe that’s what she imagined his argument would be.

“It isn’t like that. I’m not chastising you,” Isuzu said, as if concerned. Even though she was standing right next to him, her hand seemed to drift a little closer to his.

If her fingers would keep going, then squeeze my hand, he thought secretly, *how much better would that make me feel?*

“It’s just... I’m worried that we’re forcing this burden on you,” she finished.

“...Heh. Forcing?” Seiya scoffed. “If you were forcing me, I’d leave. Quit worrying so much.” He laughed it off, but Isuzu didn’t laugh at all. “A-Anyway!” Forcing a change in subject, Seiya clapped his hands together. “How are the numbers on the attractions themselves? I want to know how the renovations are paying off.”

“I send those in every week,” she told him.

“The latest ones.”

“I don’t have the latest yet... I can give you rough estimates, though,” said Isuzu, as she fiddled with her tablet. She seemed willing to let Seiya’s change of subject slide for now. “The best attendance is

here, in Moffle's House of Sweets. It's about 5000% increase since before the revamp."

"Hmm..." Five thousand percent was an incredible number, but things had been awful before the renovation, so it didn't actually tell him much. Still, going from twenty or thirty visitors per day to over a thousand was quite good.

"The next most popular is Macaron's Music Theater; it's up 3800%," she continued. "Muse's Aquario is next at 3200%. The great wheel is up 2300%. The merry-go-round, 1800%. The teacups, 900%, and the coaster, 600%."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Seiya, interrupting Isuzu's rattling off of the numbers. "I didn't hear Tiramii's Flower Adventure in there. Why not?"

"Tiramii's Flower Adventure?" said Isuzu, checking her list.

"That's, let me see... about 30%."

"What?" Seiya asked.

"Thirty percent." Seiya couldn't believe his ears, but Isuzu just repeated herself.

"Are you sure about that?" he clarified. "I thought it was doing pretty well after Golden Week." It should be over 2,000, at least. Now it was suddenly 30?

Isuzu's expression was as blank as ever, but she seemed a bit troubled about something. "I found it strange, too. Recently, the foot traffic just plunged..."

"I'd been worried about that, but I didn't realize it was that bad..." Seiya said. "Let's go see."

"Right now?" she asked.

"Of course."

They went to Tiramii's Flower Adventure and found a terrible scene awaiting them.

"Emergency! Emergency! Call the infirmary, mog!" came a cry.

"Close the entrance! Calmly lead the guests currently present to the exit!"

"There is no fire! I repeat, there is no fire!"

Members of the cast, some from the mole-like Mogute Clan, were running this way and that. Seiya grabbed one of the panicking Mogutes and asked him: "Hey, what happened?"

"Mr. Manager! Perfect timing, mog! A lighting fixture fell earlier... it hit Tiramii-san, mog!"

"What?!" The word "again?" nearly came out of Seiya's mouth. This was the third accident this month. He'd ordered them to be strict with their safety precautions and had performed a number of surprise inspections, but still, the accidents happened. An accident had *just* happened. Even though securing the light fixtures was the most basic

of basics...

What the hell are these idiots doing?! Seiya wanted to shout, but he just swallowed his rage and headed for the scene of the accident.

“Tiramii’s Flower Adventure” was an attraction in which guests rode in a gondola through a world of flowers. In the past, that meant following one set course, but the renovation had set up simple quiz panels here and there. The guests’ responses would change the course of the gondola, which gave them different shows from the flowers.

As in the other attractions, Tiramii himself would be waiting in the final area, where he’d do various magic tricks and offer up different prizes based on their responses to the quizzes. It was in that final area where they found him now.

“Urgh...” The diminutive canine mascot Tiramii lay there, covered in blood. “Mii... mii...”

A bucket-sized light was lying on the ground next to him. He’d probably gotten a direct hit from it, in what would have been a serious injury for a human... Though, actually, it was a serious injury even for a mascot.

“Tiramii-san! Please wake up, Tiramii-san!” His part-time assistant, the Bando Biino from before, was kneeling next to Tiramii, shaking him.

Each time she moved him, Tiramii groaned in pain. “It hurts, mii... It hurts, mii... I’m gonna die, mii...”

“Don’t say that! We have a stretcher on the way! Please, hang in there!” Biino’s voice was firm. She’d been injured just that morning herself, but she seemed to have completely forgotten about that by now.

“Mii... the light... I can see the light, mii... Is that... my homeland, the Tiradaho region of Maple Land? Such beautiful flowers... and standing there... my dead grandmother, mii?”

“Tiramii-san, stay with us!” she begged.

“I’m done for, mii... But Biino-chan... if you wouldn’t mind... I’d like you to rub my belly before I die, mii...”

“Y-Your belly? Okay!” Biino rubbed Tiramii’s belly.

“...Okay, I feel... a little better now, mii... Thanks a lot, mii...”

“R-Really?! Please, keep fighting!” she told him. “I’ll rub you as hard as I can!”

“Oh, ohh... that feels good, mii. A little lower if you would, mii...”

“Lower? R-Right here?”

“A little lower, mii... Just keep rubbing. Ahh, that’s good, mii. Harder! And faster!”

“Er, ah, um...” Biino sounded uncomfortable.

“As thanks, I’ll rub your belly, too! Come closer, mii! Come on, closer!”

“Um, um... No, I can’t, I can’t...” she objected.

“You’re amazing, Biino-chan! More! More! Let’s rub together, mii! Let’s rub together, mii! ...Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Puff me! Puff me! Ah, yes, I’m... it’s... mii! Mii! ...Mmmmmiiiiii!!”

“Enough, you mongrel!” Tiramii was right on the verge of some sort of climax when Seiya stomped hard on his stomach.

“Burph! Kanie-kun, what are you doing, mii?!”

“Shut up!” Seiya snarled. “No one wants to hear a cutesy-pie voice do all that gross moaning!”

“Mii, mii...”

“Look! Sento’s so disgusted she even forgot to shoot you!” Seiya pointed at Isuzu, who had drawn back to the far wall. She was speechless and pale, covering her mouth with a hand.

“Hmm... She sure does look disgusted, mii...”

“Of course she does!” he fumed. “...And Bando!”

“Y-Yes?!” Biino, flustered, came to attention as Seiya shot her a glare.

“You know he’s a nexus of sexual harassment, so stop buying into whatever he tells you!” Seiya ordered. “When things like this happen, just push him away and glare at him!”

“Hmm? Oh, that sounds nice too, mii...”

“You! Shut! Up!” Seiya threw a fist on the mascot’s bloodstained head and ground it in.

“Ohh! Spare me, spare me!” Tiramii begged.



Biino spoke up to defend the flailing mascot. "S-Stop it, Kanie-san! Tiramii-san is injured, isn't he? What if you kill him?!"

"This won't kill him!" Seiya scoffed. "He's just fine."

"That's not true, mii! Well, my naughty tail may be fine, but still!" Tiramii let out a sudden, self-effacing giggle, while covered in blood. It was utterly absurd.

"You see?" Seiya pointed out. "Anyway, just don't listen to anything this idiot says."

"But I felt a little obligated, since Tiramii-san got hurt protecting me..." Biino explained.

Well, that part was a surprise. Seiya furrowed his brow. "Really?"

"Really, mii. The light suddenly fell, and I pushed Biino-chan out of the way, mii. Then it hit me instead..."

"It's my fault. I... I always seem to be the cause of some trouble or other... and now Tiramii-san's been hurt because of it..." For once, Biino seemed genuinely despondent about the bloodshed that always surrounded her.

It made Seiya feel something... hard to describe. Rather than comment on it, though, he just cleared his throat and said: "...Well, no matter. Bando, go get changed or something. You're covered in Tiramii's blood."

"I-It's okay!" she said. "I'm used to being covered in blood!"

"Stop being used to it!" Seiya snapped. "Get going already!"

"O-Okay!" At his urging, Biino dashed through the door to the backstage area.

Once the metal door had closed, Tiramii staggered to his feet. "Boy oh boy... that was a real cockblock, mii. Kanie-kun, I'm holding this one against you."

"Oh, so you *can* stand. You big drama queen."

"Yeah, but I really am hurt, mii... I should have liver and chives tonight, to compensate for the loss of blood! Could I put it on the company account, mii?"

"Request denied," Seiya told him.

"I knew you'd say that, mii..." Tiramii let out a sigh, then pulled a wet nap out of his pocket and mopped up the blood on his head.

"...But I gotta say, there've been a lot of injuries around here lately, mii. Accidents and stuff. Last week some guests got into a fight and I got stabbed. Then the week before that, I was testing one of the gondolas and it jumped the track, mii."

"You're surprisingly hardy for a weird chibi dog..." Seiya observed.

"Heh! Maple Land men know how to take punishment, mii!" He sounded strangely proud of it, though Seiya hadn't meant it as a compliment.

"About those accidents and injuries..." Isuzu, who had just been

watching the back-and-forth, finally spoke up. "The frequency of them is unusual. They've already been ordered to make safety a priority here, and in practice, they're much more careful than at other attractions."

"Right..." Seiya trailed off.

"That's true, mii. You know the light that hit me just now? It's one the Mogutes ran tests on yesterday. How is that possible? I don't get it, mii."

"The accidents are likely what's causing attendance at this attraction to plummet. They're covering things up as best they can, but word of mouth is spreading. And, how to put it..." Isuzu faltered.

"What is it?" Seiya asked.

"I feel a certain ominous, forbidding aura around this attraction," she admitted. "I think the guests pick up on it unconsciously and choose to stay away."

"Aura?" he wondered. "I don't feel anything like that."

"I suppose you wouldn't. You seem lacking in spiritual sensitivity, Kanie-kun."

"Hmm." Seiya would certainly agree about that. He had no interest in ghost stories, and he could stride boldly into places that others found "creepy." Back in middle school, a girl with a strong "spiritual sensitivity" in his class had told him that "spirits stay away from arrogant, bullheaded people like you." That was similar to what Isuzu was saying now, and he had a vague sense that he was being called a boor.

"But I don't sense anything like that either, Isuzu-chan. I think it's just your imagination, mii," said Tiramii, in a carefree tone. He was definitely the biggest boor in all of AmaBri; feeling like he might have something in common with Tiramii plunged Seiya immediately into depression.

"What's wrong, mii? You suddenly look tired."

"Ah... it's nothing," Seiya told him.

"Well, my own instincts aside..." Isuzu looked around. "There's clearly something unusual happening here. If we wait for a major incident, it'll be too late. I would recommend closing down the attraction temporarily."

"Hmm... I was just thinking that myself..." Seiya mused.

Tiramii panicked. "No! I know things are bad, but I'm doing my best here, mii! Don't close my attraction, mii!"

"Well, that's a surprise," Seiya said. "I thought you'd be glad for an excuse to slack off."

"No way, mii! I'm trying to help the park too, mii! And... and..." Tiramii stammered.

"And?"

“N-Nothing, mii. Anyway, just don’t close it, mii!” Tiramii was strongly against closing the attraction down. Frankly, Seiya wasn’t fond of the idea either; he had put a lot of money into the renovation of Tiramii’s Flower Adventure, so he would prefer to avoid letting it stand idle.

Even so, Isuzu was right: By the time a major accident happened, it would be too late to course-correct.

“I suppose we should find the cause first.” Seiya said after some thought. “We’ll close Tiramii’s Flower Adventure for three days. We’ll use that time to go back over everything that’s happened here. The incidents might have something in common. We’re looking for anything, no matter how insignificant it may seem—”

“Mii. Actually...” Tiramii said, cutting Seiya off. “I think I know what they might have in common... We don’t need to go back over everything, mii.”

“What?” Seiya demanded. “Then why didn’t you report it earlier?!”

“I didn’t want to say it, mii... Because I’m a good guy.”

“I don’t care about your feelings,” Seiya declared. “Come out with it right now. What’s the point in common?”

Still, Tiramii remained hesitant. He looked left, looked right, looked up at the ceiling, groaned a “mii,” sighed, then finally spoke softly. “...It’s Biino-chan, mii.”

“Bando Biino? What about her?”

“Biino-chan was present for all of the incidents. That’s what they have in common, mii.”

“.....” Ahh, just as he thought. The atmosphere didn’t become heavier, exactly, but both Seiya and Isuzu fell silent for a while. Tiramii had finally voiced the vague feeling they’d had since the day of her interview. Wherever Bando Biino went, bloodshed followed. He hadn’t wanted to think about it, but... “You’re saying she caused the accidents?”

“I didn’t say that, mii. I was just saying ‘anything, no matter how insignificant’ like you asked, mii.”

“Hmm...” Seiya mused. It seemed unlikely that Tiramii was just trying to deflect responsibility onto Biino. At the same time, it still seemed rather unbelievable...

“I looked back over the reports for each incident...” Isuzu said, working with her tablet. “...And it’s true that she was present for each one that occurred at Tiramii’s Flower Adventure this fiscal year. At the same time, nothing runs afoul at all during times she’s not on duty. It does seem quite unnatural.”

“Couldn’t it just be a coincidence?” Seiya wanted to know.

“Of course, that is always a possibility,” Isuzu responded.

“Mii. If this is a coincidence, then so is Oh Sadaharu’s home run record.”

“That’s a pretty opaque example...” Still, Seiya understood what he was trying to say. “But are you sure it’s all Bando?” he pressed. “Maybe the incidents happen whenever Tiramii’s around.”

“I would prefer that to be the case (←Rude), but I’m afraid that several accidents have happened even when Tiramii is off-duty. In all cases, the only point in common is Bando Biino’s presence.”

“...Do we have her resume?” Seiya asked. “I want to know more about her job history.”

Isuzu did some more searching. “I do have her resume... but of course, she’s a high school student working part time. It only contains her school record.”

“Ah, well. We’ll just have to ask her directly.”

Seiya didn’t want the rest of the cast to learn about this, so they decided to go elsewhere. They moved to his office in the general affairs building, and called in Bando Biino.

“My... job history?” She had just finished changing—apparently, she didn’t have a spare uniform, so now she was in her school gym clothes.

“Yeah, mii.”

“Tell us everything,” Seiya ordered her. “We want to hear it... for future reference.”

Biino’s expression immediately clouded over, but there was no sign of surprise there. It was as if she was expecting this to come up eventually. “Are you... firing me?”

“That’s not what we’re saying,” he explained. “Just... you know. So many accidents seem to happen while you’re on-duty. I was wondering if something might be causing it—”

“I see. Please fire me, then.”

“Hey, don’t get ahead of me,” Seiya objected. “I just want to know more about it.”

“But once you know, you’ll fire me!” Biino was adamant. “I’ve had all kinds of part-time jobs! A paper route, a coffeehouse, a fast food place, a family restaurant, a convenience store, a bento shop, a cadaver-cleaner, a maid cafe... I’ve been fired from them all! At first, they all say ‘it must be a coincidence, let’s keep at it,’ but then the accidents keep happening... and in the end, I always get fired! There’s no other choice! Because... wherever I go, awful things start happening. Some places have ended up closing because of it!” Her voice was strained with tears.

The “cadaver-cleaner” mention she’d slipped in there was certainly intriguing, but this didn’t really seem like the time to comment about it, so they all remained quiet (though Tiramii did seem to be itching

with curiosity).

“I knew it. I knew it would turn out this way again... And I love this park; I don’t want to cause it any more trouble. So please... fire me.” Biino cut off there, head bowed and sobbing. Seiya cast a glance at Isuzu, but she just furrowed her brow and shook her head as if to say, “Don’t ask me.”

For Tiramii’s part, his eyes were shining and he seemed to be thinking, “Cadaver-cleaning! Tell me about the cadaver-cleaning, mii!” (Seiya could tell from his ‘doing laundry’-like gesture.)

“Ahh, hmm...” It seems they’d been correct. He was still lacking a lot of specifics, but the rate of accidents and incidents was certainly higher when Biino was on-duty. Additionally, she was suggesting that this had had a major negative influence on her previous workplaces—something that could be seen in practice here, given the lagging attendance at Tiramii’s attraction.

Her previous employers had likely had no choice but to let her go. After all, this went far beyond just “kind of creepy.” Even without knowing specifically what occult forces were at play, firing her seemed to be the obvious call.

At the same time, as manager of a park as strange as this one, making the obvious call didn’t sit well with Seiya. His position aside, it didn’t sit well with his personality, either. After all, if he was just going to fire her, he should have never hired her! He’d seen her bleeding in that interview room, and he’d still taken her on. He’d gone out of his way! If he fired her now, it would be as if he’d lost somehow— and Kanie Seiya was a man who hated to lose.

“I won’t fire you,” Seiya declared. Both Biino and Isuzu looked shocked. “We’ll go with my first idea, a three-day break, and use that time to search for the cause. We’ll bring in a spiritualist or a medium or something, try a variety of things and see if we can find somewhere to start.”

Tiramii cocked his head at him. “A spiritualist? Kanie-kun... this is the 21st century, the age of iPS cells and big data. What age are you living in, mii?”

“You shut up! You of all people...!” Seiya began stretching out the cheeks of the annoying dog mascot from the weird magical land.

“Okay, fair enough, mii. Also, that hurts, mii. This sort of tugging’s not any fun when it’s a man doing it, mii...”

“Oh, forget it!” Seiya grumbled.

“Kanie-kun, you seem to be getting better at wrangling Tiramii,” Isuzu commented.

“You stay out of this!” he ordered. *Tiramii is annoying in a different way than Moffle is*, Seiya thought. But recently, like the rest of the cast, he had grown merciless when dealing with him. Since Tiramii himself

didn't seem to mind much, he'd accepted that it was all right to just treat him that way.

Meanwhile, Biino gazed at Seiya, eyes dewy with emotion. "Kanie-san... th-thank you... I... I..."

"Ah, I don't need your gratitude; I just can't afford to lose any valuable employees," Seiya explained. "Anyway, stay on backstage cleanup for today. If I have any updates, I'll call you back."

"O-Okay!"

"No going up around the guests, okay?"

"Right! Well, goodbye!" She bowed down low, then left the office.

"She's got a great attitude, at least..." Seiya observed.

A little while after the door closed, Isuzu spoke up. "...AmaBri's still just an amusement park, you know. We don't have any spiritualists here."

"Hmm, I guess you wouldn't..." He'd had a feeling that might be the case. Despite being from a so-called magical realm, a surprising number of the park's cast weren't any different from your typical, ordinary, layabout mortals. The only difference Seiya had noticed, really, was in the annoying prevalence of strong fighters among them. Sadly, since the park's goal was bringing in customers rather than defeating a demon lord or something, that was all rather useless.

"There must be something we can do," he finally said. "You people come from a magical realm, don't you? You must have some kind of counselors or consultants for people in Bando Biino's situation."

"Hmm... I'll look into it." Isuzu manipulated her tablet. He waited a while, but at length, she let out a sigh. "There's no specific central body. The only hits I get are for suspicious-sounding salons and spiritualist quacks."

Spiritualist quacks in a magical realm? Seiya wondered.

"...Anyway, none of it looks particularly reliable," she finished.

"The Maple Land Ministry of Health site has a warning to look out for frauds, but that's it."

"I have to say," Seiya observed acerbically, "you people are sounding less and less like a magical realm, and more like a South American or Southeast Asian-style developing nation."

"...That's hitting below the belt," Isuzu replied.

"Come on, at least argue the point!" he fumed.

"Now, now. I don't think we have to go back to the homeland to get our foot in the door, mii," Tiramii, who had been playing around on his smartphone, said leisurely.

"Oh?" Seiya perked up. "You have an idea?"

"I called up Rubu-yan, mii. I know what you're thinking, but dragons are known for their knowledge, so he might know something useful. And he happens to be free right now, so he said he'd stop by."

Tiramii was referring to the red dragon, Rubrum. Recently, the cast had started calling him 'Rubu-yan' as a sign of affection.

"You called him here?" asked Seiya, sounding alarmed. "At his size, I'd prefer to avoid having him wandering around the park..."

《You called?》

"Wah!" There was a sudden, booming voice just outside.

Seiya looked and saw a windowful of a scaly dragon face. Rubrum was peeking into the office. "D-Don't scare me like that!"

《What am I supposed to do? This is just what I look like.》



“Rubu-yan, that was fast, mii. Did you fly here again?”

《Yes. The weather was so nice today, I'd decided to have a picnic lunch in the second park. It's been a long time, you know? It's so nice to enjoy a meal while gazing up at the blue sky.》

Rubrum was enormous, which meant it took a lot to feed him. He went through fifty kilos of white rice per day (they didn't have enough meat and vegetables), yet according to him, this was a relatively light diet for a dragon. For today, he'd probably gotten some white rice cooked up in the employee cafeteria fashioned into giant rice balls and was treating himself to a little picnic.

“It is, but we sold the second park, you know? You can't just be going in there,” Seiya told him.

《It's all right, Kanie-san. They've barely touched it so far. They've only started geological surveys on the area's east side. I must say, it's really quite slow... It takes them a whole day just to survey 100 square meters. The Mogutes would have put in a few steel pipes, banged a few hammers and been done with it.》

“Don't use them as a basis for comparison,” said Seiya. “Those guys could build a space elevator in six months if they had the materials and the money.” The Mogutes' carpentry prowess was completely broken; it hardly seemed fair to compare human workers to them.

《Well, true enough. ...Oh, excuse me, dear. Are you all right?》 Rubrum craned his long neck to speak to something at his feet.

“...?” Seiya leaned out the window in time to see Bando Biino stand up and bow to Rubrum repeatedly. She must have been on her way out of the general affairs building and ended up tripping over his tail or his foot.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” she apologized.

《Ah, it's no problem at all. Just try to be more careful. My scales are quite hard and sharp, you know? I could hardly forgive myself if I damaged the supple skin of a 'JK.' Ahaha.》

“Don't say 'JK.' Aren't you a dragon?” *He also seems kind of like an old man*, Seiya thought.

《Dragons can say 'JK!' I don't want to be one of those dragons who's completely out of touch with youth culture. Once I get some free time, I'd like to go to an idol voice actress concert and do some otagei... Well, if not for the part where it would kill the people around me...》

Trampled, crushed under rubble, bleeding to death— A chill ran up Seiya's spine as he imagined the tragic scene that might transpire. “Don't,” he said hastily. “Don't go, don't dance, don't kill people.”

《Yes, I told you, I'm not actually going to do it.》

While they were talking, Biino was fleeing the scene in a panic.

The entrance to the underground passage leading to Sorcerer's Hill was close to the office building, so she was probably going there.

《Hmm...》 Rubrum hummed softly as he watched Biino's departure.

“Rubu-yan, what is it? You like Biino-chan, huh? But too bad, mii! She's mine!”

《Oh, is that so?》

“That's so, mii. She gave my belly a good rubbing earlier, mii. Rubble, rubbie, rubber duckie! Now we're rub buddies; rubuddies for short, mii!”

“Stop babbling,” Seiya muttered. Tiramii really was a creep.

《Well, that's a shocking revelation. But are you sure that's what you want? That girl—er, Biino-chan, did you say?—she's got quite a curse on her.》

“A curse?” Seiya questioned.

《Yes, a curse. The magical kind.》 Rubrum said flippantly. He had made it sound so unremarkable, it took them a minute to parse exactly what he was saying.

“That's our Rubu-yan, mii. I'm so glad I called you to check, mii!”

《Oh, really? Why, I'm honored! Ha ha ha...》

“Wait a minute,” Seiya said. “You can tell that... that Bando Biino is cursed?”

《Yes. I am a dragon, after all. Dragon eyes can see curses and blessings. To use an example that a mortal like you might understand... hmm, you know how birds can see ultraviolet light? It's a bit like that,》 he clarified, unprompted.

Seiya looked at Isuzu. She shook her head uncertainly. “I've heard legends about things like that, but nobody knows if they're true or not...”

《It's no legend. It's all quite normal,》 Rubrum said knowledgeably. 《All living beings have curses and blessings, large and small. Usually they're so minor that they hardly make a difference, but she's a severe case. That's one powerful curse; even I'm shocked by it.》

“Really? Is her curse that bad?” Seiya wanted to know.

《Yes. Latifah-sama is perhaps the only worse case I've seen.》

Seiya was taken aback. Rubrum knew about Latifah's curse?

He may have noticed his surprise, because the red dragon twitched his scales uncomfortably and released a sigh with a small puff of flame. 《Er, I'm sorry. We sort of write it off as each individual's destiny... it's considered rude to point it out. In human terms, it's... well, you know how your species has men with very little hair on their heads? It would be like turning to someone like that and saying ‘oh, you're bald.’》

“Hmm...” It was a questionable example, and Seiya wasn’t sure if it clarified things or not. But at the end of the day, Rubrum was a dragon, not a human; there was a limit to how much mutual understanding they’d be able to have. Deciding to ask him more about Latifah’s problem some day, for now Seiya cleared his throat and said: “Ahem. All right, let’s say Bando Biino is cursed. What can we do about it?”

《Do about it, eh? ...I’m afraid that’s a bit out of my field. I majored in economics in college, so... Hmm...》 Rubrum thought for a minute, then continued, lightly enough. 《I know a doctor who specializes in these things. Would you like me to introduce you?》

The next day, a doctor from a magical realm came to see them. Specifically, he came to Shinjuku on the JR Saikyo line, then transferred to the Tohto Line to Amagi Station.

“Not that it matters, but why the Saikyo Line?” Seiya whispered to Isuzu as they waited for their guest at the ticket gate.

“The Schubert Empire, where he lives, has a direct service to Omiya Station. The E5 shinkansen ‘Super Goblin’ on the 23rd and 24th platforms is very popular with Maple Land children, too.”

“Ah-hah.”

“They sell lunches in boxes that look like train cars, and they released a toy of it that turns into a robot... but apparently, that didn’t sell very well.” While Isuzu was explaining things he hadn’t actually asked about, arriving passengers began passing through the ticket gate in droves. Mixed in with the ordinary mortals was a massive man in a white coat.

No, he wasn’t a massive man— he wasn’t human at all. He looked like an oni, with dark brown skin and a pig’s snout. Seiya’s knowledge of RPGs suggested that the man was an orc, or an ogre, or something like it, but the mortals around him didn’t seem to notice anything amiss—perhaps thanks to the Lalapatch Charm dangling from his neck.

“He’s an ogre, I see,” Isuzu observed. “That translates to ‘man-eating-oni’ in Japanese, but don’t worry. His type mainly eat sansai soba.”

“..... I suppose that’s reassuring, but at the same time, I feel strangely disappointed,” Seiya replied. There would be nothing fun about meeting an opponent like that in an RPG.

“Anyway, try to ask him for help without offending him,” Isuzu advised. “He’s our only option at the moment.”

“I know,” he told her.

Isuzu held up a card so that their visitor would notice them. It was a hand-written note reading, “Welcome: Obiza-sama from Schubert” with “Amagi Brilliant Park” written beneath it. (“Obiza” was the name

of the doctor in question.)

The ogre who came through the ticket gate looked at them with a start. Seiya had had an inkling, but there was now no question that this was the doctor Rubrum wanted to introduce them to.

“Setsuko-san...” the ogre said, pointing with a trembling finger. “Setsuko-san! Oh, it is you, Setsuko-san! I’ve been longing to meet you! Ahh, Setsuko-san! Setsuko-saaan!” There was a charge, followed by contact. He had shoved Seiya aside to grab hold of Isuzu’s chest. “Ahh, I knew it was you, Setsuko-san! This springiness! The sensation! Setsuko-san! I... I can’t take it! Let’s run away together! Please! Throw away everything and come away with—blugh!” A point-blank shot from Isuzu’s musket sent the ogre Obiza flying back.

“Why... why must everyone I meet be this way?” Isuzu trembled, while Obiza lay on the ground, twitching.



“Are you under some kind of curse that inflames the sexual harassment instincts of old men?” Seiya questioned. “But... you know, you’re the one who said not to offend him. What now?”

“Setsuko-san...” Obiza groaned. “You’re so cruel, Setsuko-san...”

“Who on earth is Setsuko-san?” Seiya wanted to know.

As she had been ordered to stay backstage, Biino had spent the last few days doing nothing but cleaning and arranging equipment.

Thanks to that, when accidents did happen, at least they never affected the guests. There was one time, though, when she tipped over a can of wax, and Wanipii slipped on it while he was passing... He’d crashed into a pile of cleaning tools at the end of the corridor, and ended up with a mop handle sticking out of his bum. He was now in Amagi Hospital, though he was scheduled to be released tomorrow due to insufficient beds.

She could still hear his distressed “pii, pii, piii!!!” ringing in her ears. (It was followed by “I’ve never experienced ecstasy like this before in my life, pii!”... but best to forget that part.)

Is this also my fault? Biino wondered. That giant dragon person—Rubrum, his name was—had said that she was cursed. That meant that what she had felt for so long—that she was the cause of the misfortune around her—was actually true.

“Ahh...” She found a sigh escaping her lips. Biino looked all around, and was relieved to see no one had been watching. She didn’t want anyone to see her like this. Always bright and cheerful! That was her motto in life. Never look sad. Gloom just invites more gloom. That was the philosophy she’d always followed.

That’s right! Don’t give up, Bando Biino! she thought. She slapped her cheeks hard with both hands, letting out a *whap!* that echoed through the hall. Seconds later, drops of blood splattered on her beautifully polished floor.

“Ah...” She’d apparently slapped herself so hard that she’d given herself a nosebleed. Biino quickly clamped a tissue to her nose, and was just starting to wipe up the blood stain when she heard a voice behind her.

“B-Biino-san? Are you okay?” She looked and saw Chujo Shiina and Adachi Eiko standing there, looking worried. The two of them had started at the park at the same time she had.

Shiina was a year younger than her, and also in high school, but she was so petite that she looked like a little kid. She spent most of her time looking flustered, but she was an amazing person with a prodigious singing voice who had saved the live show from disaster during golden week. When they’d met the first time, she’d been struck dumb by Biino’s odd behavior, but lately they’d been able to interact like normal people, more or less.

The other, Adachi Eiko, was in college. She had starred in AVs before. AVs! Biino assumed that was an abbreviation for “Authorized Versions” (i.e., of the Bible). The Bible published by King James of England in the 17th century was considered to be “authorized,” so Biino figured she’d starred in video versions of Bible stories. Biino had always found religious people unapproachable, but Adachi Eiko seemed very open and friendly.

They worked in different departments, but as fellow newcomers to this odd park, they had inevitably grown closer over the weeks. This was about the time in her last few jobs when people would start avoiding her because of the trouble she caused... but for now, these two were still nice to her.

“E-Eiko-san, Shiina-chan,” she greeted them. “What is it?”

“W-Well... You were muttering and bleeding from your nose... so re rere wowwied... Um, sorry! We were worried, I mean!” Shiina said, trying not to fumble her words.

Even when she’s just talking to me, she gets so nervous she can’t speak right... Even though she doesn’t have to go to the trouble... Biino thought. Determined not to worry them, she forced a big smile onto her face. “Oh, I’m fine! Happens to me all the time. I’m fine, I’m fine... I’m really fine!”

But Shiina and Eiko didn’t look reassured.

“Well, if you insist... But we heard from Moffle-san and Macaron-san that there’s a sort of curse on you...” Eiko said.

“It’s a little hard to open up to you because of how you’re always getting hurt... but this explains a lot. Also, we thought you might be feeling sad...” Shiina said.

“Eiko-san. Shiina-chan...” That alone was enough to make Biino want to start crying. She couldn’t believe they were that worried about her. In her old jobs, people just looked at her like she was creepy, and made all kinds of excuses to stay away from her. What nice people they were! *I don’t want to quit working here. But maybe they’d be better off without me...* she thought.

“I... I appreciate it. But it’s probably best if you stay away from me,” Biino told them sadly. “I’m dangerous, like Rubu-yan-san said. I got Wanipii-san hurt just the other day.”

“Yes, we heard about that...”

“But, well, it’s only Wanipii-san...”

“D-Don’t talk like that! I mean, I know he wasn’t going to die or anything, but the fact is, I’m the one who caused it, you know?” Biino was trying to sound as casual as she could, but Eiko and Shiina were still frowning.

“Biino-san... You really mustn’t be so hard on yourself,” Eiko told her.

“Sh-Sherright! She’s right...” Shiina agreed. “You can’t let that curse thing bother you! I know you’re going to get better!”

“You guys...” The tears Biino had been holding back were threatening to breach their dam. *Ahh, not good. Now’s not the time for that*, Biino thought. *I can’t look sad. I have to grin and bear it. I have to always look cheerful, even in front of the people I care about most!*

“Ahahaha! Oh, really... You’re both so silly!” Biino shouted in as neutral a voice as she could manage. “I’m fine, really! Totally fine! Absolutely fine! Don’t look so serious, okay?”

“Biino-san...” they said.

“Anyway, you’ve probably got lots of work to do, right?! Stop worrying about my silly drama and get back to your posts already! Go on! Get going, you guys!” Biino grabbed her mop and swung it back and forth as if to shoo them off. Eiko and Shiina backed away, looking troubled, but still concerned. “Come on, cheer up!” she told them. “Turn those frowns upside down, okay?”

“...But Biino-san. You’re clearly forcing it...” Eiko said, but Biino kept up her shrill laughter.

“I’m telling you, I’m fine! This curse is no big deal! It’s kind of ‘bring it on,’ right? ...A-Anyway, I’d better go! I’ve got cleaning to do!” And with that one-sided insistence, Biino ran off alone.

Biino had been worried that they might follow her, but of course, they weren’t going to go that far. She turned the corner and ran down the stairs, and once she reached a place where no one was around, she wiped her tears with her sleeves.

Gotta smile. Gotta smile. Fortune comes to those who smile, she recited to herself, but the tears wouldn’t stop coming. *How long do I have to keep doing this?* she wondered.

“Mii...”

Biino started at the sound of the voice. She looked and saw Tiramii standing beside her. “T-Tiramii-san? How long have you been there?”

“I was on break, and I just saw you show up... Sorry, did you not want anyone to see you like this, mii?”

“Ah, no...ahaha! I’m fine, I’m fine! No problems at all!” She slapped a smile onto her face, but Tiramii didn’t return it.

“Biino-chan,” he said, “don’t force yourself like this.”

Squeeze. Tiramii hugged her, and it had none of his usual lewdness. It was a completely natural, kind gesture, and it didn’t even occur to Biino that she might want to run away. Her body sunk into his soft, plush fur. It was a warm and comforting embrace, accompanied by a very nice fragrance.

“Tiramii-san?” she said.

“If you’re not feeling good, you should say so, mii. Stifling yourself

like this will drive you crazy eventually.”

“Um... S-Sorry,” she stumbled on. “But I’m not sure this is appropriate...”

“If you want me to stop, I will,” he replied.

“Huh?”

“I just wanted to help settle you down,” Tiramii explained. “I know I act the way I do, but I still make my living comforting people, mii.”

“But it feels so...” *Unfair*, she finished internally. She debated with herself over whether or not to say it aloud, but in the end, she chose not to. If he had been a normal man, she would have shouted ‘stop!’ and pushed him away. But in practice, the person with his arms around her was a cute, plush fairy. It was like hugging a pillow; it didn’t trigger any feelings of inappropriateness. Besides, he wasn’t being his usual jerk pervert self—he was just trying to shoulder some of her awful burden, that much was clear. “...But why?”

“No real reason. I just got kind of worried, mii. If you really don’t like it, though, I’ll stop.”

“Ohh... I don’t even know what to say to that...” Even so, Biino couldn’t keep a crack from entering her voice. “Sorry. You can stay but just... d-don’t tell anyone...”

“Okay,” he said simply.

“And only... only this one time,” she specified.

“Sure. That’s okay, mii.”

“I’m sorry. I really am,” Biino apologized. “It’s just for a little while. So...”

“I’ll hug you tight, mii. Really tight.”

“Ahh... ahh... Ahhhhhh...” She couldn’t hold back any longer. A wail burst out from her throat. Tears flowed from her eyes. She buried her face in his pink fur and sobbed and sobbed.

“I’m tired. I’m so tired,” she confessed. “It’s like the whole world is against me and I don’t know why. It’s not fair. It’s one awful thing after another, and I always laugh it off, but... but they should know I’m not fine! Help me! Someone just help me!”

“Right,” said Tiramii.

“Everyone... Everyone was so happy! My dad, my mom... my big brother! But now everyone’s... everyone’s so crazy! Even my landlady now... I can’t take it anymore! Help me! Why am I cursed?” Biino wailed. “What did I do wrong? It’s not fair! I can’t take anymore!”

“Mii...”

Biino kept crying. Even after the tears stopped, she remained where was, still trembling. She stayed that way for about ten minutes before at last, feeling exhausted, she pulled away from Tiramii. “I’m sorry...”

"Feel better, mii?"

"...Yes. Thank you."

"Glad to hear it, mii. I won't be telling anyone; don't worry. This kind of thing's pretty out-of-character for mii, so I wouldn't want it getting out there, either." Tiramii patted her on the shoulders.

"A-Ahaha..." Biino laughed, wiping her red, swollen eyes. This time, her smile wasn't forced. "Thank you... really, Tiramii-san. I feel so much better. I don't know how to thank you enough..."

"Hey, i-it's nothing, mii. Don't make such a big deal out of it, mii."

"D-Don't say that! I really need to thank you somehow..." Biino's peered into Tiramii's eyes with her troubled, upturned gaze.

Tiramii seemed to tense up a little bit and cleared his throat.

"Thank me?"

"Y-Yes..."

"Then... then... let's pick up where we left off before!" he told her.

"Rub my belly really hard, mii!"

"Ah, sorry. I won't do that," Biino clarified.

"Mii! Thought not!"

Seiya didn't know how long ogres lived, but it seemed to him that Obiza was quite long in the tooth. He appeared perfectly aware of why he had come here, but when it came to pretty much anything else he was extremely absent-minded, seeming to forget new information ten minutes after he heard it.

Incidentally, it seemed "Setsuko-san" was an assistant who had worked in Obiza's household. Seiya didn't know what had gone on between the two of them, but it was probably nothing he wanted to hear.

"Now, Setsuko-san," Obiza said. "Is dinner ready yet?"

"We fed you earlier, and this is the third time you've asked," Isuzu said, annoyed.

It had happened right after she'd led him to the newly renovated meeting room in the park's general affairs building. He'd said he was hungry, so they'd brought him katsudon from the staff cafeteria; in a truly outrageous gesture, he had eaten only the breading and left the pork behind. On top of that, he called Isuzu "Setsuko-san" at every opportunity. At first, Isuzu just patiently corrected him, but she had eventually gotten tired of it and grown more blunt in her responses.

"I got to say, this is one dull place you've got here," Obiza remarked. "Rubrum made it sound like a paradise, all full of hopes and dreams."

"I'm sure that he was referring to our onstage area. Backstage, it's mostly ordinary office buildings, of course," Seiya explained patiently.

"That ain't what I'm talking about, boyo," Obiza told him. "I'm talking about something much more important. By dreams I mean..."

well, ah... you know.”

“I do?”

“Tiddies.”

“Ah, I see. Do you think we might talk about work now?” Seiya responded, mustering all of his willpower to bear the comment, ignore it, and move on. “I’m sure you’re aware of the reason we called you here. It’s come to our attention that a magical illness has befallen one of our park’s workers, and we were informed that you might know a way of treating it. In other words, she’s... cursed? And we were hoping you might be willing to examine her.” While Seiya spoke in as formal a manner as he could, Obiza sipped some roasted green tea and swished it around in his mouth. Seiya was worried he was going to spit it back out, but the ogre swallowed it down in the end. “Er, are you listening to me?”

“Course I am,” said Obiza. “You like tits, don’cha? You’re a good boy.”

“..... So, anyway, about this curse...” Once again pulling on all his restraint, Seiya explained the relevant points.

After a discussion with Isuzu earlier, he’d decided not to mention Latifah’s curse; Maple Land had apparently dedicated all available resources to lifting it, and all the methods they had tried had failed. Bringing in some shady doctor from another country probably wouldn’t contribute anything new, and on top of that, they had no guarantee that Obiza wasn’t a spy (even if it did seem vanishingly unlikely). Isuzu believed it was out of the question to let some unknown stranger have his way with Latifah, even temporarily.

In response, Seiya had pointed out: Instead of calling for some half-senile old ogre, shouldn’t they send Bando Biino to Maple Land and have the trustworthy doctors who saw to Latifah inspect her? But apparently, that presented its own difficulties.

“After all, Bando Biino is a mortal, and so her curse is a different variety than ours, it seems.” Isuzu had explained. “There’s a great deal we don’t understand about mortal curses. The differences can be so great that the staff who tried to dispel the princess’s likely wouldn’t be able to help.” She made it sound a bit like having a physician performing veterinary medicine.

Though while he could see it for the mascot fairies like Moffle and Tiramii, Seiya still had no idea what the difference was between the otherwise human-looking Isuzu and Latifah and “mortals.” But Isuzu insisted it existed, so it probably did; it wasn’t as if she had any reason to lie about this.

“...Now, er, we lack the relevant health insurance coverage, we should probably discuss compensation in advance. If you could perhaps provide a quote, for reference, regarding your standard fee...”

Seiya tried again.

“Ah, cut the crap already.” Obiza folded his arms and groaned. “You got a patient or don’cha? Bring her in already.”

“Er, you’re willing to examine her, then?” Seiya asked.

“Course I am! I might not look it, but I’ve been a doctor for over 100 years. I’m the one who taught Jung how to use penicillin. And lately I’ve been trading tiddie-touches for the use of *TAP cells for—”

“Ah, yes, yes, of course! Please wait a minute and I’ll call her in!” Seiya shouted, trying to prevent the man’s annoying, error-ridden rant from continuing. He tried to signal to Isuzu with his eyes, but she had already used her smartphone to tell Tiramii to bring her in.

“Now what kind of way is that to act?” Obiza demanded. “You don’t take me seriously, is that it?!”

“Perish the thought, sir,” Seiya replied.

“And Setsuko-san, where’s my dinner?!”

“You just had katsudon,” Isuzu answered coldly.

“Hmm, did I? Then where’s my after-dinner tiddies?”

“...Kanie-kun, may I shoot him?” she asked.

“Yes. No! Hold on,” Seiya amended. “Wait until business is finished, first.”

“A pity,” she mumbled.

“Come on, time’s a-wasting! Bring on the tiddies!” Obiza said.

“Would you please shut up for a minute!” Seiya barked.

“Setsuko-san, Setsuko-san! That young feller’s being mean to me! Did you hear that?”

“That’s enough! Why does it have to be like this?!” Seiya shouted, losing his temper at last. Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Heya. I brought the patient, mii.”

“Um, ah, excuse me!”

Tiramii entered the meeting room, leading a nervous-looking Biino.

“Hmm? That girl...” Obiza looked at Biino, brow suddenly wrinkling, expression suddenly severe. His eyes in that moment were not the eyes of some sex-starved old man, but of a superior doctor with many decades of experience. “Oh...?”

“This is promising.” Seiya and Isuzu whispered to each other. They watched as Obiza slowly stood up and walked up to Biino.

“Well, well...” said the doctor. “This girl is...”

“Y-Yes?!”

“This girl is... hmm. This girl is...” Suddenly, his voice lost all of its gravitas, and he plunged his head against Biino’s chest. “I’m sorry. You were Setsuko-san! I’ve missed you so, Setsuko-san!”

“Um, um...?!” Biino didn’t know what to say.

“Ohhhh, oh, oh! Run away with me, Setsuko-san! I’ll treat you

good! I'll buy you nice things! Stay with me, won't you? Won't you? Run away with bleeeeauuuugh!" Biino thrust him away, then Isuzu shot him, then Seiya kicked him. In summary: he went flying. "Gwah..."

"Wh-What just happened, mii?! Mii!" It had all happened so suddenly that it put Tiramii in a panic. After hemming and hawing for a bit, he mimicked Obiza's gesture and grabbed Biino's chest. Following a moment's elation over that blissful sensation, he was slapped and shot and kicked and went flying in the same way. "Gahh... I don't understand, mii. I'm the victim, mii."

"Shut up! Can't we ever have a conversation like normal people?!" Seiya shouted, but Tiramii's gaze was a million miles away.

"Hmm... Who is Setsuko-san, anymii? I bet she's a sexy, sexy MILF, mii... I hope you'll introduce us some day, mii."

"...That's right, boyo!" Obiza boasted. "Setsuko-san's a MILF!"

"Really, mii? I bet she's an F-cup or bigger, mii! She must really be something!"

"Ohh, Setsuko-san! Setsuko-san!"

"I'm building an image of Setsuko-san in my mind, mii. She puffs you six ways from Sunday without breaking a sweat. Oh, you're a naughty phore, Setsuko-san. The ultimate MILF, mii!"

"Both of you, shut up!" Seiya demanded. "Well, I can't ask the old man to shut up, but I do want to have a proper conversation!"

"Mii. I guess it was too stimulating of a greeting for poor Biino-chan, mii."

"U-Um! I was a little startled, but... I'm fine! Yeah, I'm fine. I... I'm fine," Biino said, but she still seemed shocked by the abruptness of the sexual harassment, and Isuzu seemed to be comforting her.

"It's all right, Bando-san. I'll look out for you."

"Y-Yes, thank you..."

"If that old man attempts to use his check-up as a pretext for harassment," Isuzu announced, "I'll shoot him dead right on the spot."

"Shoot me?" Obiza asked. "You'll shoot me dead?!"

"Yes, I'll shoot you dead."

"My, my. Having a young missie like you do something like that to me... I don't think karma'd forgive me." The old man grinned, his cheeks crimson.

"..... Do you know what 'shoot to death' means?" Seiya wanted to know. "...Ah, never mind. If you can examine her, please proceed. If you can't, please leave at once."

"Ah. Ah... that's right. Come over here, missie." Apparently ready to actually do his job at last, Obiza took a stethoscope out of his bag. His expression radiated gravitas.

Biino pulled herself together and stepped forward timidly. "Um..."

Please proceed!"

"All right. First, take off those panties!"

Isuzu fired. Obiza went flying several meters.

"Gwah!"

"That is what 'shoot to death' means," she told him. "I shot you halfway to death. The next time you try something like that, I'll shoot you halfway again. That will bring your life down to one quarter. Then I'll keep on half killing you until you're down to one life point."

"Hmm, that's awfully extreme..." Obiza sulked.

"Kanie-kun, Tiramii, please wait outside."

At Isuzu's prompting, Seiya and Tiramii left the meeting room and went to the break room one floor down to wait.

"I feel so tired..." Seiya sighed. "Maybe things would have gone faster if Sento hadn't been there."

"Right? He's a troublesome old-timer, mii..."

"You were doing the same things! I've never liked that kind of garbage behavior to start with!"

"Hmm, I guess it would be upsetting to a high schooler like you, mii. Sorry, mii."

"It would upset me even if I wasn't a high schooler," Seiya told him sourly.

"Well, what's done is done, mii," Tiramii said leisurely, then bought some strawberry milk from the break room vending machine. He guzzled it down and let out a long sigh. "Mm, delicious, mii!"

"You seem awfully calm about this... I'm so worried about that old man that I can barely sit still," Seiya admitted.

"Don't worry, mii. Rubu-yan says he has a good track record with this stuff, you know? Like, he's undone a lot of high-profile curses."

"Oh? I wonder about that..." Seiya was having enough trouble with this talk of curses to begin with. Of course, he had a magical power of his own, so he couldn't dismiss the premise outright...

"But I hope Biino-chan will feel better, mii. She's been really down these past few days."

"Has she?"

"She has, mii. Biino-chan loves this park, mii. She's pouring her soul into keeping it going, but the curse just won't let up. She's even started asking herself if she should just quit for the good of the park, mii. It's a sad story, mii. I wanna help her, mii."

"There's a surprise," Seiya remarked. "I never knew you could be so considerate."

Tiramii seemed like the sort of man who cared about what was in a woman's pants, not her heart. Guys like Tiramii—the kind who were constantly flirting with women—tended to take an almost clinical approach towards them. Getting too emotionally involved made

breaking up with women harder, and cheating nearly impossible. Sincerity was an enemy to be shot down.

People with copious “relationship experience” tended to be viewed as having some deep philosophical understanding of the world, but Seiya personally thought that was a load of bunk. If you were just genuine and sincere, you didn’t need to keep swapping partners in and out.

“Considerate, huh? Maybe that’s my problem, mii.” Rather than getting angry about Seiya’s words, Tiramii just sighed. “My problem is that I get too attached to people, mii. It ends up getting me hurt.”

“You?” Seiya retorted acidly. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“It’s true, mii. When I get serious about a girl, I get really annoying, mii. That’s why I guard my heart by making passes at everyone, mii.”

Seiya listened, but found it all extremely hard to believe.

Tiramii snorted with dissatisfaction as he noted Seiya’s dubious expression. “I’m not so different from you, Kanie-kun. I play the flirt; you play the high-and-mighty type. We both do it to keep people at arm’s length, mii.”

“Guh...”

“Thought so, mii. Bossing Isuzu-chan around, looking down on everyone... you just do it to make life easier, right? I’m the same way, mii.”

“Hmm... there might be some wisdom in those words...” Seiya folded his arms and thought. “Yet when you’re the one saying them, it can’t help but feel like I’m being scammed somehow.”

“That’s cruel, mii! I was trying to be serious for once!” Tiramii raged, but Seiya waved a hand dismissively.

“Oh, shut up. I never asked you to be serious,” he told the mascot. “...Anyway, does this mean you’ve formed some attachment to Bando Biino?”

Tiramii’s cheeks turned red and he gazed into the distance. “Hmm, well... A little. I think I’ve fallen in love with her, mii.”

“For real?” Seiya asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did something happen between you two?”

“I can’t say, mii. But I’ve definitely fallen in love with her!”

Internally, Seiya made a distressed noise, which he just barely managed to keep himself from voicing.

“Biino-chan’s smile is just so invigorating,” Tiramii gushed. “All this awful stuff keeps happening to her, but she stays cheerful and optimistic. Ah, but that doesn’t mean I want to have my way with her, mii! I just... I just want to be close to her as much as I can.”

“You should probably stop sexually harassing her, then,” Seiya

observed.

“Mii. I know that. I just do it instinctively whenever I get the chance... You know how it is. Like how old soldiers throw themselves to the ground any time they hear a gunshot, mii.”

“I’m not sure that’s a great example.” Seiya hadn’t forbidden workplace romance at the park; as far as he was concerned, as long as it didn’t get in the way of their work, anyone could feel any way they wanted to about anyone. But Tiramii was one of their headliner mascots, and if there was one thing they couldn’t afford, it was a scandal.

“Well,” he decided, “you know she’s underage, so she’s off limits. If you can keep it platonic, I don’t care what you do. As long as you don’t make any trouble for her, anyway.”

“I won’t, mii! Also... please keep this a secret from Moffle and the others, mii. They’d laugh at me if they heard, mii... I just can’t keep it to myself anymore, so this is like me whispering in the ear of a tanuki statue.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone... And you think of me as a tanuki statue?” Seiya asked incredulously.

“You’re a lot like one, mii.”

“I am not! ...Anyway, it’s been quite a while. Do you think the examination is over yet?” He re-tightened his uniform tie and cast a glance in the direction of the conference room.

In response to Seiya’s mutterings, Tiramii suddenly froze. “D-Darn it, mii!”

“...?” Seiya waited for him to continue.

“I should have checked that old man’s bag, mii! I bet... I bet... he’s got those goods that city law prohibits selling in hotels, and he’s using them to do awful things to Biino-chan!”

“Just what kind of goods are you talking about?”

“You know, the kind that vibrate, vibrate, and vibrate!” Tiramii explained. “Grrr, he’ll pay! Vibration attacks are *my* thing! Grrrr! Raaaarrgh!”

“Hey, wait! Sento’s with her, remember?” Seiya reminded him. “Calm down... ah, darn it!”

Tiramii had already blown his top and was racing furiously in the direction of the meeting room. Seiya followed after, but at times like these, Tiramii’s acceleration was second to none. He’d probably already exceeded 3G. Seiya lost sight of him in no time.

In the distance, there was a gunshot.

Seiya ran down the hall and up the stairs. By the time the meeting room finally came into sight, Tiramii was lying prone on the floor in front of the room. He had probably tried to come inside and been shot to death by Isuzu.

“Mmm... Mii... Mii...”

“I knew this would happen...” Deflated by the predictable exchange, Seiya ran up to them.

This time, though, things were a little bit different. Normally after shooting Tiramii to death, Isuzu would be seen stifling her anger as she put her gun away. But at the moment she was huddled on the ground, her face pale.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

“Ah. A ricochet broke the glass, and a fragment...”

Seiya suddenly noticed that a nearby window had broken, lodging a glass shard in Isuzu’s left arm. “...?! Hey, that looks bad! We need to get you to a doctor—”

“It’s all right. It’s not deep. But this has never happened before...” Isuzu pulled out the glass and staunched the wound with a handkerchief as she spoke. The cloth was quickly stained red. “I was only aiming for Tiramii, but it was the most incredible series of coincidences... Dr. Obiza had just declared that he’d figured out the cause of her condition, and this happened immediately afterwards.”

“You think it’s not a coincidence?” Seiya clarified.

“Yes. It’s the result of the curse. There’s no question in my mind.” Her tone was dead serious. Biino, who was thankfully uninjured, just kept watching them, lips pursed.

“Well, that’s the reason you called me here, ain’t it?” Obiza said. He patted the fretting Biino on the shoulder and puffed out his chest confidently. “There’s a specter possessing this girl.”

“A specter?”

“That’s right, a specter. It’s looking down at us right now and laughing. It’s the one behind everything that’s happened.”

“What? It’s watching us right now?” Seiya looked around the room. Obiza nodded firmly.

They decided to perform the exorcism (the treatment?) after closing time that night. Obiza had said that there was a chance that the ritual could cause collateral damage, so it was better to wait until the guests had all left.

For the location of the ritual, they had selected the large stage in front of Maple Castle at the center of the park— the place they had performed the live show since Golden Week. It was a wide, open spot, and well-lit at night. Isuzu had also mentioned something about there being a barrier nearby, so if there was any danger, they had a place to evacuate to.

“...I think I know why you called me here, fumo. I’m to beat up that specter if things go south, is that it?” Moffle said. He was doing a little shadow boxing with his paws.

“With how busy things have been lately, I’ve got a lot of pent-up

frustration worked up, ron. I've been looking for someone to take a crack at. Don't worry! I'll only leave him half-dead," Macaron said. He was grinning, and radiated an ex-delinquent energy.

"I know I asked you to be here, but you're just making me more anxious right now..." Seiya muttered. The mascots' muscle-headed tendencies might make it harder to negotiate, if necessary. Although, who even knew if you could negotiate with a specter...

Meanwhile, Tiramii's eyes were sparkling. "Thanks so much for being here, mii! It's so great to have friends in a pinch! And don't you guys worry! I brought lots of high-powered explosives too, mii!"

"Why would you bring those?! Throw them away!" Seiya shouted at him angrily. He had been wondering about that suspicious stack of wooden boxes at the corner of the stage. So they were explosives, were they?

"Huh? How come, mii? They could come in handy, mii."

"Did you forget how Sento got hurt this afternoon?" Seiya demanded. "That wasn't a coincidence. If that specter thing gets it in its head to fight back, don't you think those explosives are the first place it'll look?"

A ricocheting bullet had shattered the glass and hurt Isuzu. If that was within the specter's powers, there was no way it wouldn't be glad to have a crate of explosives nearby.

But Tiramii just let out a sigh. "Mii. You just don't get explosives, Kanie-kun."

"What?" Seiya asked.

"What I brought is closer to plastic explosives—what you'd call Semtex or C4, mii. They're really stable. Even if you set fire to them, they'll just burn slowly, mii. They're not going to explode because Isuzu-chan accidentally shoots them or something, mii."

"Oh?"

"Basically, it's not what you're thinking. It's not 'a bullet hits the explosives, then blammo!' They're perfectly safe until I plug in the detonator caps and trigger the planned explosion, mii. ...Of course, if the specter is a specialist like me, he might find a loophole..." He smiled cynically, but with confidence. "But that specter's so pathetic, he's reduced to tormenting poor little Biino-chan, you know? Some newbie trash who gets his rocks off preying on little girls couldn't possibly comprehend my explosives, mii."

Seiya was reminded of Tiramii's past life as a felon, getting sent to prison for cracking safes. He'd also shown a great deal of knowledge of explosives and traps during their trip to the dungeon, so his words carried some weight, at least.

"For instance, this! Look at this, mii!" Tiramii reached into his pouch and pulled out what looked like a camera on a tripod. Seiya

didn't know how he fit it inside that tiny bag, but it was probably similar in principle to Isuzu's musket— or perhaps, to Japan's favorite cat robot. At any rate, there was no point in nitpicking every bit of magic he saw from these people.

"What is it," he asked, "a camera?"

"It's a sensor, mii. It's called an iTRAP. It ignores mortals and responds only to spirits and fairies and the like, mii." He extended the three legs and set it in place.

"That's quite a name..." Seiya commented. It reminded him of how questionable new gadgets with little practical use often stuck a lower-case "i" onto their names to make people think of Apple products.

"I'm going to hook this iTRAP up to one of my carefully arranged directed explosives. Pass in front of the sensor, okay? It won't react to a mortal like you, but if a magical realm creature like me passes in front..."

He had Seiya walk in front of the sensor first. Nothing happened.

Then Tiramii walked in front of the sensor. The iTRAP began sounding an alarm: *Beep, beep, beep, piff!*

"Mii?!"

It shot out a mine, about the size of a soft drink can, from nowhere in particular. The mine spun around, hung in midair for a moment, and then exploded.

It was apparently true that they were directed explosives— the Munroe effect from the shaped charge fired the explosion exclusively at Tiramii, the one who had triggered the sensor.

Blam. Hit from above by the targeted blaze, Tiramii burst into flame.

"Tiramii?!"

Moffle and Macaron ran up and sprayed Tiramii with the fire extinguishers they had prepared in advance. They eventually managed to put out the fire, but Tiramii's limbs were still twitching.

"Mii... Mii... Anyway, as you can see, it works."

"What were you thinking, ron? That's not like you."

"To trigger your own trap... It's outrageous, fumo." Moffle said in agreement, as he and Macaron both pointed out the error of Tiramii's ways.

"I-I just wanted to prove how serious I am, mii. I really want to protect Biino-chan..."

The two seemed a bit surprised by the sincerity in Tiramii's eyes. They glanced at each other for a second, then both snorted as though nothing had happened.

"Hmph. Speaking of Biino, she's not here yet, ron."

"Moffu. She really should have been here by now..."

"Oh, she's here," Seiya said.

They looked and saw Bando Biino approaching from upstage. She was flanked by Isuzu and Obiza, and there was a strangely tense air around them.

“You seem to be having quite an ordeal,” Isuzu said from Biino’s side, addressing Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii. “...I’m aware that we asked you to come here, but you’re forbidden from taking any actions without orders. We’re outside the barrier, so we can’t afford to be reckless. Anything that goes wrong could cause trouble for Bando, or even the princess.”

“Moffu. Got it, fumo,” Moffle said, stiffening a bit.

“Do you really?” Isuzu demanded.

“Of course I do, fumo.”

“Incidentally,” she remarked, “the princess is currently watching us from above.”

Seiya was reminded that they were right in front of Maple Castle; he looked up and saw Latifah waving at them from the ramparts high above. She was blind, of course, but she could probably still hear their conversation.

“Good luck, everyone!” she shouted to them. Latifah had probably been informed of the situation, yet her expression was far from serious. She was acting like a leisurely spectator at a golf course.

“Now that you know,” Isuzu told them, “I urge you to take this seriously.”

“Moffu.”

“Got it, ron.”

“Understood, mii,” the three said in turn.



“Now!” Old man Obiza clapped his hands. “We’re all here, are we? So now, I’ve got to ask you all to take off your panties!”

“Knock that joke off,” Seiya told him.

“No one asked you to take yours off, creepo!” Obiza retorted.

“Just get started already!”

“Get started?” The old man was confused. “Get what started?”

“The ritual!” Seiya yelled. “The ritual! You were going to purge the specter possessing Bando Biino, weren’t you?!”

“...Ah, that’s right, I completely forgot. Let’s see, better start with a magic circle...” Old man Obiza pulled out a piece of chalk and began drawing a magic circle (or something like it) slowly on the stage. Not only were his hands trembling, but he had to double-check his notes a few times, and even erased a symbol he’d drawn and redrew it. All in all, it didn’t inspire much confidence.

“That’s one shifty old man, fumo.”

“Are you sure about this, ron?”

“Not really,” Seiya sighed. “He came highly recommended, but...”

While Moffle and the others passed the time whispering to each other, Tiramii took Biino’s hand and spoke up encouragingly. “Biino-chan, do your best, mii. I’m sure we’ll get the curse removed, mii. Then we can be happy every day!”

“R-Right,” she agreed shakily. “But are you sure you want to do all of this for me?”

“Don’t be silly, mii! Our cast are like family, mii!”

“Th-Thank you!” she gushed.

Seiya watched their back and forth, and for some reason, he couldn’t help finding it tedious. “Come on...” he muttered. It was strange; most people would consider it a heartwarming scene. But Seiya was working overtime to go along with this, and he couldn’t stop himself from thinking that this sentimental crap was all a waste of time. He wished they’d knock it off and get to the treatment already.

Wait a minute. That’s strange, he realized. “Sentimental crap?” While I do enjoy such turns of phrase, why would I feel that way about the exchange between Biino and Tiramii?

On top of that, for some reason, it was Biino’s behavior, not Tiramii’s, that annoyed him. Yes, that was indeed strange... Why would he be annoyed with Biino, who objectively hadn’t done anything wrong?

Seiya had a look around him. There was nothing odd about the behavior of Isuzu, Moffle, or Macaron. They didn’t seem moved by the scene, exactly; they just seemed like they wanted to do their best to help her. Seiya seemed to be the only one annoyed by it all.

Now, he got to wondering: Seiya had never quite warmed up to

Biino. She had always gotten under his skin, for some reason. That had only gotten worse when he'd learned she was the cause of the trouble— even though she hadn't done anything wrong. *I thought I was more even-tempered than this*, Seiya thought. *Why would I feel this way about Bando Biino—*

"Huh. You're actually fighting it, boyo." Obiza, who had finally finished drawing the circle, was looking at Seiya with one raised eyebrow.

"Fighting what?" Seiya asked him. "What do you mean?"

"The curse, of course. Never seen a mortal resist it before," the old man remarked. "Ain't you an interesting one?"

"Well... I have been feeling inexplicably annoyed about all this," Seiya admitted. "Are you saying that's part of the curse, too?"

"You bet. It starts with irritation, but that gradually builds up. Sooner or later it turns to anger and revulsion, and eventually you'd start wanting to do her active harm."

"Hmm..."

Why were Isuzu and Moffle fine, then? he wondered.

But when he pointed that out the discrepancy, Obiza explained. "Because they're fairies, obviously."

"Ahh." Moffle and Macaron he could understand, but was Obiza saying that Isuzu was also a fairy? That seemed a bit off, to Seiya. Other than the usage of that strange musket of hers, she seemed entirely like an ordinary human.

Realizing that Seiya was looking at her, Isuzu looked back at him, confused. "...Is something wrong?"

"No... it's nothing," he responded absently.

"...?" Isuzu, now confused, didn't reply.

Obiza continued. "Well, let's just say... mortals are more susceptible to the effects. The girl's family spends a lot more time with her, so I'll bet the curse is even more effective on them."

"Now that you mention it, it was her brother who stabbed her, fumo," Moffle said, apparently remembering what had happened during the interview a while back.

"Yep, that'd be the curse," Obiza agreed. "If the exorcism goes off right, her brother will probably take his right mind back."

"Um. W-Wait, please." Biino, who had been listening, finally interjected. "What about the other mortals I've made friends with at the park, then? Eiko-san and Shiina-chan... You made it sound like people like Kanie-san were rare."

"How should I know?" The old man asked her. "There's all kinds of mortals out there."

"....."

And that was the end of the subject.

“Come on! Let’s get this over with, fumo! I wanna get home and play some SRW.”

“You mean Z, ron? Lucky.”

“I wish I’d been in that one too, mii...”

Before the ritual began, Obiza presented three rules to be followed at all costs:

First: All participants must do as Obiza says.

Second: Even if the specter appears, all participants must hold off on attacking it until permission is given.

Third: All participants must refrain from lashing out if Obiza touches Isuzu’s or Biino’s breasts.

“Hey, what was that third one?!” Seiya demanded suspiciously. “That has nothing to do with the ritual!”

Obiza clucked his tongue. “Tsk, you caught that, eh? You’ve got remarkable intuition.”

“It has nothing to do with intuition!” Seiya objected.

“Ah, can’t hear you!” Obiza replied airily. “Now, let’s get started; girlie, you stand right here. That’s right,” he encouraged Biino, “right at the center of the magical circle. The rest of you can stand at each of the points.”

Listlessly, Biino headed for the center of the circle, while the others took their places the pentagram’s points. There were five of them—Seiya, Isuzu, Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii—enough to cover each point. In fact, the actual reason Seiya had invited Moffle and Macaron was because Obiza had said they needed at least five people.

“Now, according to my spellbook, we’ll be needing your cooperation to get us through the ritual,” Obiza told them.

“You mentioned that before, but... how does this work, specifically?” Seiya asked.

“To activate the spell, each person on the star’s points needs to say the proper words of power. I’ll be translating questions out of my spellbook; once you all answer correctly, it’ll activate the spell.” In other words, Obiza would ask them questions, and if they gave the correct answers, the exorcism ritual would proceed.

“This sounds tough, mii...”

“I thought we were just here to beat up a specter, ron...”

“Isn’t there a faster way, fumo?”

Ignoring the three mascots’ complaints, Obiza started up the ritual.

“Now, let’s begin! Ico urem enrir swidaro! Great spirit, lend me your power! Ah, how do you read that again? That’s right, truth! Truth is words and words are truth! Th-Therefore I, Obiza, son of Goranbiza, h-hereby declare the five p... principles? The five principles of unity!” He sounded like a student who hadn’t done any prep work now ordered by his teacher to read aloud from the

textbook.

It had Seiya feeling nervous, but the magic circle had nevertheless reacted to the words of the spell, and was beginning to glow with a pale blue light.

“Thou who standeth at the point of ‘wood!’” Obiza intoned. “Macaron, son of Secaron!”

“Ron?” Macaron, who was standing at one point of the star, pointed at himself as if to say “what, me?” The crest at Macaron’s feet was shining with a strange green and brown light, probably indicating that that point represented wood.

“Now, Macaron! Answer my question! Art thou prepared?!”

“Y-Yeah...” Macaron replied uneasily.

“Question the first!” Obiza announced. *Dunnn!*

“...Who authored the Fujimi Fantasia Bunko light novel *Tokyo Ravens*?! One, Kagami Takaya! Two, Azano Kouhei! Three, Gatou Shouji! Four, Irie Kimihito!”

“Huh, ron? Uh?” Bafflement flooded onto Macaron’s face.

“...Which of the four will you choose?” Obiza demanded to know. “Time’s running out! You have five seconds! Four! Three...!”

“Th-Th-Three, ron!”

Bzzt! The buzzer sounded out, signifying a wrong answer. The magic circle channeled a powerful electric shock through Macaron’s body. “R-Ron?! Gwaaaaah!”

“Sorry, wrong answer! The correct answer is two: Azano Kouhei!” said Obiza, correcting him. “That popular novel spawned a series that got broadcast on Tokyo MX. Everyone should read it!” Applause rang out from nowhere in particular.

“Ugh... ghn...” Macaron, on his hands and knees at his star point as smoke rose from his body, protested. “H-How was I supposed to know that, ron?! I can’t remember authors, ron! Even for something as famous as *Att*ck on T*tan*, most people don’t remember the author’s name!”

“Oh, really?”

“Besides, I thought this was an exorcism ritual?! Why are you giving us a multiple choice quiz, ron?!”

“I’m just reading the questions as they come up in my spellbook,” Obiza explained innocently. “See?” Obiza held up the book to him. It was written in some strange magical language, so none of the others could read it, but the words were glowing in rainbow colors. Perhaps it was designed to create questions specific to their ritual.

“I should tell you that the ritual can’t move forward until each person on a star point answers a question right,” Obiza told them. “So you’d better take it seriously!”

“This is ridiculous...”

“Wh-What a terrifying ritual, mii...”

“Moffu. We’ll just have to give it everything we’ve got.”

The group steeled themselves, and Biino was starting to look a little nervous.

Seiya could feel a headache coming on, but it was clear that they wouldn’t be able to exorcise Bando Biino unless they went along with the ridiculous ritual.

“You get it now, eh?” Obiza chuckled. “Also, if anyone other than the intended respondent answers the question, it’s disqualified. So stay alert!”

“Okay,” they chorused.

Well, whatever, Seiya thought. He’d just go along with it for now.

“Next up! Thou who standeth at the point of ‘fire!’ Kanie Seiya, answer my question!”

“Ahh... right, right...” Seiya hadn’t used his magic yet. He couldn’t imagine he’d miss out on anything by using it on the old man now, but then, he did have his “grenade rule”— He should try to make do with his own knowledge first. *I’m the smartest one here anyway! I can answer most difficult questions with ease! Seiya told himself. Bring it on!*

“Question the second!” *Dunnn!*

“...What was the winning horse at the 118th Emperor’s Cup? One, Offside Trap! Two, Silence Suzuka! Three, Stay Gold! Four, Mejiro Bright!”

“How the hell should I know?!” Seiya screamed, clenching his hands into fists. *I’m in high school! I know jack-all about horse racing! I barely even know that the Emperor’s Cup exists! Have they really run it over 100 times? And aren’t horses all basically the same?! Sweat was starting to flow down his brow.*

He cast a glance and saw Macaron (who loved gambling) waving his hands and feet all around and looking like he wanted to shout something out. He probably knew the answer, but there was no way he could communicate it to Seiya through gestures like that. *And his sheep’s hoofs can’t flash any number past two!*

“Answer quickly!” commanded Obiza. “You have ten seconds! Nine! Eight!”

Ah, fine, I’ll do it! Seiya used his magic. He’d have to steal the correct answer directly from Obiza’s mind— He didn’t want to get electrocuted, either.

Since it was the magic he’d received from Latifah, the princess of Maple Land, it was powerful enough to work on anyone of any race, and he immediately heard the thoughts on Obiza’s mind.

...I tell you, that Isuzu girl, has got the most amazing tiddies. Well, maybe not as great as Setsuko-san’s, but I wonder if I could get her to (redacted)...

He'd missed his chance. He'd wasted his shot. *Dammit, this is why we have the grenade rule!*

"Two! One! Time's up!" Obiza announced.

Electricity. "Gwaaaaaah!" Seiya screamed and collapsed under the force of his penalty.

"Ahh, too bad! The winner of the 118th Emperor's Cup was number one, Offside Trap! That was the 1998 race. Silence Suzuka had been in the lead, but she broke her left foreleg while running. They said she'd never recover and ended up euthanizing her..." Obiza added in a slightly pained voice.

Macaron, deep in chagrin, began lashing out at Seiya. "Ron! You don't know about that tragedy?! That common knowledge among racing fans?! How do you expect to be our acting manager, ron?!"

"I don't care about horse racing, dammit!" Seiya bellowed.

"How can you be so useless?!" Macaron screamed back.

"You got your question wrong too!" Seiya retorted.

Ignoring the bickering Seiya and Macaron, Obiza continued solemnly(?) with the ritual. "We still don't have even one correct answer. ...So, let's keep it moving! Thou who standeth at the point of 'earth!' Yisuzurch Sentolucia, answer my question!"

Isuzu, standing on the earth point of the star, froze up. Seiya knew her real name, but it still felt strange to hear it. "Very well," she declared solemnly, "I'm ready."

"Question the third!" *Dunnn!*

"...The chemical symbol H₂O represents which of the following?" One, water! Two, steel! Three, plutonium! Four, trinitrotoluene!"

Isuzu wavered for a second, probably wondering if it was a trick question, but then answered quickly enough. "...One?"

"Correct!"

Da-da-da-ding! The sound of applause and cheers rang out from nowhere in particular. The brown light at the point of Isuzu's star glowed brighter than before. Isuzu put a hand to her chest in relief.

"Well, nicely done," Obiza complimented her. "Though I personally would've loved hearing you scream in agony when you got electrified, but... ah, well. At last, the point of earth is set to correct answer mode!" There was another round of applause and cheers.

Where are those voices coming from, anyway? Seiya wondered. "Hey, wait! That question was a lot easier than mine and Macaron's!" he objected. "I think there's some bias going on with these questions!"

"Is not!" Obiza retorted. "My spellbook knows what it's doing!"

"You..." Seiya fumed.

Obiza ignored him and continued his hosting. "Now, thou who standeth upon the point of 'metal!' Moffle, son of Gnoffle!"

"Moffu..." Moffle's eyes glinted. "Heh heh... You're in my territory

now, fumo. A quiz like this is nothing to me, fumo.”

“I like your spirit!” Obiza told him. “Now, answer! Question the fourth!” *Dunnn!*

“...which of the following Japanese bureaucracies deals with matters of finance? One, Ministry of Foreign Affairs! Two, Ministry of Finance! Three, Ministry of Defense! Four, Ministry of Silly Walks!”

Another easy question— That meant that they would clear two of the five points. Seiya put a hand to his chest and sighed in relief. Then...

Wait. Wait a minute... Moffle wasn’t answering right away. His brow was furrowed and he was trembling as if fighting some internal battle. *Hang on a minute! It’s obviously the Ministry of Finance! Why are you hesitating?! How can you not know something so basic?*

“Ngh... Moffu.”

“Time is running out! Five! Four! Three...!”

Moffle seemed to be thinking hard. *Hang on a minute*, Seiya thought. *It can’t be...*

“N-Number four! Ministry of Silly Walks, fumo!”

Bzzt! Electricity.

“Gwaaah!” Moffle spasmed violently as the unseen audience roared with laughter. Despite the powerful damage being inflicted, Moffle’s expression reflected pure satisfaction. It’s as if he was saying, “Let it be so.”

As black smoke rose out of Moffle’s body, Seiya barked at him angrily. “Did you choose the wrong answer on purpose?!”

“M-Moffu... It’s an entertainer’s fate, fumo. When there’s a choice like that, we can’t help but choose the fourth option... *cough*...”

“Are you stupid or something?!”

“Ugh... what a dastardly question, fumo. Whoever thought these up is a real devil, fumo...”

“...Whatever,” Seiya said in disgust. “Just lie there and die.”

“Moffu.” Moffle died.

“Thou who standeth at the point of ‘water!’” said Obiza. “Tiramii, son of Zevarmii, answer my question!”

“Mii! I’ll do my best, mii!” Tiramii raised a hand, looking pumped.

“Question the fifth!” *Dunnn!*

“Which engine was used by the American Cold War-era supersonic recon plane, the SR-71 Blackbird? One, JT11D-20! Two, JT11D-21! Three, JT11D-22! Four, JT11D-23!”

Tiramii faceplanted and pounded his fist on the ground. “That’s insane, mii!”

It was horrible. Not even a total war maniac would be able to answer that one without Google. Even the pilots who flew the thing might not remember the engine number...

“M-Most people don’t even know the Blackbird’s model number! And to ask for its engine... mii! Mii! I have no idea, mii!”

“You’re running out of time! Three... two...!”

“Mii! T-Two!”

Bzzt! Electricity. “Gwaaaaaah!”

“Sorry. The correct answer was number one! Incidentally, the engine used in the Blackbird was a Pratt & Whitney (abridged). ...And we’re back to the starting point now. Macaron-san, time for you to answer!”

“R-Ron?!”

“Question the sixth!” *Dunnn!* The SFX rang out mercilessly.

Obiza had claimed the spellbook was providing the questions, but there seemed to be some active malice in their presentation; everyone kept getting questions far outside of their field. No matter how smart the person might be, their question seemed specifically designed for them to be unable to answer.

But Obiza kept reading them out, no room for argument or evasion...

“Question the tenth! What’s the serial number of the Lambda Driver-mounted AS 〈Laevatein〉’s head-mounted Gatling gun? One, GAU-12/S! Two, GAU-15/S! Three, GAU-17/S! Four, GAU-19/S!”

“Th-Three, mii! Gwaaaaaah!” Tiramii doubled over in pain.

Another round of brutal questions went by. “Question the fifteenth! When Fujimi Shobo’s literature section chief, Morii, was a newbie, what extra did he try to package into Fantasia paperbacks, incurring the wrath of his superiors?! One, a Robot Damashii figure! Two, Matsuzaka Beef! Three, a Hermes bag! Four, Tenga!”

“T-Two? Gwaaaah!” Seiya writhed in pain.

Another round of brutal questions went by. “Question the twentieth! What is the name of the JR Tokai Line special express that takes passengers from Tokyo Station to Osaka Station in three hours? One, the Tokaido Shinkansen! Two, the Yamanote Line! Three, the Ginza Line! Four, the Trans-Siberian Railway!”

“Four, fumo! Gwaaaaaah!” Moffle writhed and screamed (and deserved it).

“Ahh... e-everyone...” Biino had been watching nervously the whole time, but now she finally cried out in tears. “Please... please stop this! I can’t let you suffer this way just for me! This isn’t right!”

“Pipe down, girlie!” Obiza barked. There was a hard light in his eyes. “The ritual is a trial. It takes a strong will to endure this kind of suffering. The power of that will then feeds the magic circle, which will help to make the specter manifest!”



“Oh no...” she wailed.

“Besides, look at them; the eyes of these men, who won’t give in! They’ll endure any pain to save you!” He turned and pointed to Tiramii. “That there is the true brilliance of the soul!”

“Mii! That’s right! This electricity is nothing compared to the punishment dealt out by Isuzu-chan, mii! Bring it on, mii!” Tiramii offered up a trembling thumbs up.

Meanwhile, Seiya, Moffle, and Macaron were slumping, looking as if they were on the verge of giving up.

“I-I’ve had enough, ron...”

“When are we going to get real questions?”

“Moffu. I want a beer,” they each said in turn.

“I’m still the only one who’s gotten a question right. Would you kindly hurry up?” Isuzu muttered while fiddling leisurely with a puzzle game on her smartphone.

“Um, I feel like... Tiramii-san is the only one who really does want to help...” Biino pointed out, causing the rest of them to straighten up immediately and protest.

“Th-That’s not true, fumo!”

“W-We’re working hard, ron!”

“C-Come on, you’re an important part of our cast,” the three insisted.

Isuzu also nodded firmly (though her eyes remained locked on her smartphone screen). “There’s no need to worry, Bando-san. Tiramii is correct in that I have been training them constantly. They’re not going to give up over such minor doses of pain.”

“Ahh...” Biino didn’t know what to say.

“Besides, if they run away now, I’ll punish them.” Isuzu smoothly pulled out her musket.

“Darn it... it always leads to that,” Seiya observed wretchedly.

“So annoying, fumo.”

“Ron. You know, people hate violent heroines these days...”

“Question the twenty-first!” Obiza declared, blasting through the stagnating atmosphere.

The ritual(?) continued. When they reached the 27th question, Seiya finally got one right.

The question was “Who was the first Japanese winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics? One, Barack Obama. Two, the Dalai Lama. Three, Yukawa Hideki. Four, Winston Churchill.”

All of a sudden, an easy question. Only one of the answers was even Japanese.

“Th-Three...” he stammered.

“Correct!”

Da-da-da-ding! The fire symbol at Seiya’s feet shone with red light.

Exhausted, he sank to his knees. "Come on... what was all that suffering for, then?" he asked exasperatedly.

"Couldn't tell you," Obiza told him. "I'm just doing as the spellbook dictates."

"Dammit," Seiya mumbled. "Once we get out of here, I'm burning that thing..."

"What was that?!"

"Uh, nothing. Just keep it going." Seiya waved a hand in annoyance.

Obiza snorted at him and continued with the questioning. "Question the twenty-eighth!"

The brutal questions continued. They went around twice more. On the 34th question, Macaron finally got his right answer. The question was, "What was the winning horse at the 118th Emperor's Cup? One, Offside Trap. Two, Silence Suzuka. Three, Stay Gold. Four, Mejiro Bright."

"One, ron..."

"Correct!"

Da-da-da-ding! The wood symbol at Macaron's feet lit up with symbolic green. "...Wait, that was the question Kanie-kun got wrong the first time, ron!"

"Oh, was it?" Obiza asked innocently.

"...Ugh, even repeating questions. It's like... some really cheap quiz game? The ones you have to memorize are the worst, ron!"

"Question the thirty-fifth!" Was this the power of age? Despite all their complaints and objections, Obiza remained completely unflappable. The questions continued.

They went around three more times, to question 42. There, Tiramii finally got his question right. The question was, "Which of the following rappers titled their autobiography *The Ice Opinion*? One, Iceberg Slim. Two, Ice T. Three, Ice Cube. Four, Vanilla Ice." It sounded ridiculous, but...

"Ah, which was it, which was it... I dunno, mii! T-T-Two, mii!"

"Correct!"

Da-da-da-ding! He appeared to have guessed the correct answer at random; it almost felt strange that they hadn't got one right that way before.

"Whew..." Tiramii wheezed.

"Now, only one remains! Moffle-san, good luck!"

"M-Moffu..."

"Question the forty-third!" *Dunnn!*

Moffle got a similar question to the ones he'd been receiving previously. "What is the name of the Japanese samurai philosophy as written about by Nitobe Inazo? One, Bushido. Two, Kishido. Three,

Kendo. Four, Hokkaido.”

“F...” Moffle began to say, but a murderous glare from the group caused him to hesitate.

“F...?” they said together.

“F... F...” he subsided.

The group stared at him as if to say, “If you don’t answer this one seriously, you’re dead. We’re sick of this. We want to move on. We worked hard to get our own questions right. If you give a stupid answer just to get laughs... you know what will happen, don’t you?”

“Moffu...” Moffle’s paws trembled. He seemed to be fighting a powerful internal struggle. Perhaps he was wondering: *If I answer number one right now, will it make me a failure as an entertainer?* “F... F... F...”

“F... what? Time’s running out. Please answer the question. Five, four...”

“F...”

“F...?”

“Ngh...” he choked, then screamed, giving in to the peer pressure despite overwhelming sorrow. “One! It’s one, fumo!”

He even has tears in his eyes, Seiya observed. What an absolute moron.

Of course, that was the right answer. *Da-da-da-ding!*

“Yes, correct!” Obiza exulted. “At last, the five elements are united! The ritual moves on to the next stage!”

The five points of the pentagram glowed even brighter than before. There was a dazzling swirl of light. The symbols of the five elements poured into the center of the circle, merging together and teeming with mysterious power. Magic particles danced, darted, and wove around in geometrical patterns.

There was a flash— A bright flash. At last, the five powers merged into one, which enveloped Biino’s body.

“What’s happening?!” Seiya demanded to know.

“Something’s coming, mii! Something’s coming, mii!”

The spell responded to the massive power being channeled into it, and the five lights flashed on and off, blindingly.

“M-Moffu!”

At last, a fissure rent the air, bursting with particles large and small—which formed a line of letters that sparkled before their eyes. “Stage One: Multiple Choice Quiz Complete!” the letters read. “Move on to Stage Two: True or False Quiz! Each participant must get five questions right to move on! Good luck, everyone!”

“...And there you have it!” Obiza sang out. “Good luck, everyone!”

Moffle and the others deserted their star points and bum-rushed Obiza, abandoning all pretenses of respect for the elderly to punch

and kick him as hard as they could. If Isuzu hadn't stopped them with her usual musket, they probably wouldn't have stopped until he was seriously disabled.

Sadly, the old ogre was as tough as his appearance presaged. Despite being badly wounded, shoulders heaving, he informed them, "You have to follow my directions in order to complete the ritual," and so they reluctantly engaged in the true or false quiz.

The ceremony proceeded, Various things happened. They cleared the second stage.

This was followed by the third stage—a buzz-in quiz—and they all gritted their teeth and completed it.

The magic circle shone brightly, and the words "All stages cleared!" appeared in the air above them. A fanfare rang out from nowhere in particular, accompanied by applause and cheers for their noble fight.

"I-Is it over?" Seiya whispered. The rest of them just stood there limply, feeling half-dead.

"Yes! Well done!" Obiza complimented them all. "...Now, before I activate the spell, let's announce the rankings! In first place, Isuzu-chan! In second place, Kanie Seiya-kun! In third place—"

"Nobody cares about that!" Seiya yelled.

"But the quiz for viewer giveaway—"

"Just do it already!"

"...Boring. Fine, I'll do it." Obiza snapped his fingers. The magic circle sparkled brightly again in a multitude of colors, and the impressive-looking symbols danced and darted, completing the spell (...or so it appeared).

"It seems to be for real this time," Isuzu said. Seiya knew nothing about magic, so all he could do was brace for whatever was coming.

"Yeta uras nor arno ervan wal irdoi! I, Obiza, son of Goranbiza, command you! Spirit that possesses Bando Biino! Rise, and be manifest!"

The symbols surrounded Biino's body.

"W-Wah... what?!" she stuttered.

"Don't move!" Obiza commanded her. "Stay where you are!"

There was another blinding flash. When the light cleared, they could see an exhausted-looking Biino standing erect. Behind her was a man clad in black. He looked to be about twenty years old, with pale skin and slick, sparkling black hair. Although he was a man, there was a bewitching quality to his almond eyes. He was smiling coquettishly and hugging Biino tightly from behind. Biino hung in his arms, face pale, as if unconscious.

"....." Seiya found the scene reminiscent of a butterfly trapped in a spider's web. "I-Is that man the specter?"

“That’s right,” Obiza told him. “That appearance is temporary, of course. They don’t usually take on physical form; it’s that spell of mine that’s made him manifest.”

“Hmm...” Seiya had been picturing something a bit more appropriately specter-ish... a skeleton in a black hood and cape, perhaps. Instead, the specter possessing Biino had a radiant quality. Of course, he was not as handsome as Seiya himself— Yes, he looked a bit pallid, really. Seiya was still by far the most attractive man here.

“Well, Kanie-kun. What should we do now?” Isuzu asked.

Why would you ask me? I’ve never talked to a specter before either... he thought. “Er... I’m not really... sure...”

“Are you feeling cowed because we’re dealing with someone more attractive than you for once?” she asked. “Please try to get a grip.”

Bullseye. “Wh-What?! That’s not true!” he protested. “Completely not true!”

While Seiya engaged in his emphatic denials, Tiramii began shouting at the specter: “Hey, you stupid specter! We’re gonna make you pay for hurting Biino-chan, mii! So give us your name before we kick your ass!” It was an utterly straightforward request. For once, Seiya was relieved to have someone as oblivious to social niceties as Tiramii around.

《My name? Heh... I have none, of course...》 The specter’s voice echoed across the stage. It was as fine a voice as his appearance would suggest.

“G-Guh...”

“Kanie-kun, do you feel like you’ve lost again?” Isuzu asked.

“Y-You don’t have to harp on every little thing! Leave me alone!” he barked back, holding back tears.

“Kanie-kun, Isuzu-chan, shut up, mii. ...Hey, specter! Don’t act cool just because you don’t have a name! I guess I’ll have to call you Specter Vomitty Pukington, mii!”

“Ron... Heh heh... Vomitty... hahaha...” This apparently tickled Macaron’s funny bone, because the mascot began trembling with mirth, face bowed.

The specter’s expression betrayed neither amusement nor anger.

《Very well. You may call me by whatever name you like. The nature of words of power is that they reflect back upon the speaker— Ugly words will merely befoul your own souls...》

Seiya cast a glance at Obiza. He nodded back, expression serious, as if to confirm the specter’s words. “Be careful, Tiramii-don. He’s right about words of power. If you hit him with ugly words, it’ll just weaken your own soul, which’ll make our exorcism harder to perform.”

“Okay then, Specter Vomitty R. McPukington! Hands off Biino-

chan right now, mii!”

“Didn’t you hear him?!” Seiya demanded.

“I think befouling his soul might be making him stronger, fumo.”

“R-Ron... V-Vomitty R... bwahaha! Hahahahaha!”

“I really don’t understand Macaron’s sense of humor...” Isuzu slumped while Macaron rolled around on the ground.

It was the group’s usual antics, but the specter didn’t seem bothered in the slightest. Acting like it was all white noise to him, he merely took Biino’s slender jaw in his hand and drew close to her cheek, as if to whisper sweet nothings into her ear. «Leave this girl? You ask the impossible.»

“I’m not asking, mii! This is a get-out-before-I-beat-your-butt situation, mii!”

«Heh. A ridiculous proposal.»

“Take this then, mii!” Tiramii pulled a metal bat out of his pouch and charged the specter fiercely. He’d probably realized that using explosives might catch Biino in the attack, but—

“Don’t you do that!” Obiza warned him. He’d warned them before they started not to attack without permission, but Tiramii must have forgotten about that over the course of the long quiz ritual.

“Grrrrrr! Feel the power of my anger and my love!” He leaped forward and swung the metal bat down as hard as he could on the specter’s head.

But the bat just swung through the air and hit the ground.

“Mii? ...W-Well, take this, then!” He swung again, and again, the bat didn’t even make contact with the specter.

«Such a pointless act...» The specter glared at Tiramii. Just then, there was an “accident”— The metal bat slipped out of Tiramii’s hands, hit the ground, bounced back, and struck him right in his own face.

“Gbwah!” Blood spurt out of Tiramii’s nose, and he toppled over.

Normally he would have taken it as Tiramii just spontaneously self-destructing, but Seiya knew who they were dealing with. He knew that the specter had used his curse power to make it happen that way.

“Tiramii?! Damn you! You’ll pay for that, ron!” Macaron shouted angrily. He pulled out a bike chain he’d been hiding somewhere and charged boldly for the specter, swinging it around. “Hey, you! Don’t you move, ron! Take this!”

«Heh...»

But just as the chain was about to make contact, Macaron’s foot slipped. “R-Ron?” He fell flat on his butt, causing the chain to snap like a whip and hit the sheep-like mascot right in the face. “Ngaaaaa!” Macaron screamed as he rolled around, bleeding.

“M-Macaron?! To hurt him so badly he screams like a beaten

henchman... Moffu, you'll pay for that!"

"Stop it!" Obiza warned Moffle against charging forward too. "The specter hasn't taken physical form yet! Your attacks won't work! They'll bounce back and hurt you instead, like you just saw!"

"Then I won't use a weapon, fumo. If I charge chi into my fists to magnify their power and slam that into him...!" Moffle dropped his hips and charged up his chi. "Here I go, fumo! Specter Vomitty R. McPukington! Receive the strike of my soul!"

"Don't do it, damn you!" Obiza bellowed.

"Raaaaaaaaaagh!"

"Listen to me!"

Moffle charged forward. Mysterious power charged in his paw, poofing into existence as a pale blue flame.

He really does seem to get stronger or weaker as the situation demands it... Seiya thought as Moffle charged the specter.

"Even if he doesn't have physical form, he can't stand up to this attack! My secret technique, the Tenma Fukumetsu Ken! I'll have him on his hands and knees, coughing up blood, fumoooo!"

《Fool...》

"Moffu?" With a glare from the specter, Moffle tripped, did a somersault, then smashed into the ground. His flame-engulfed fist hit himself in the face, and while the impact itself didn't seem to hurt very much, the release of the fiery chi caught Moffle's whole body in a fireball.

"Gubluuuuuuuuh!" He rolled around, letting out an even more henchman-like cry than Macaron had. When the flame went out at last, Moffle was on his hands and knees, coughing up blood. "M-Moffu..."

"I told you!" Obiza said.

The three mascots had been summarily disposed of.

Isuzu, Obiza, and Seiya were the only ones left. It was the kind of situation that would spark an immediate reset-restore in an RPG.

"Ugh... what are we going to do? He won't talk, physical attacks don't work... After all that work to summon him, we can't do anything!" said Seiya.

"Hmm. That sure is strange..." Obiza agreed. "Normally, a specter manifested through a ritual like this would be suffering and made to take physical form... but this one isn't. Must be a powerful specter..."

"What should we do, then?"

Isuzu pulled out her musket and pointed it straight at the specter.

"Sento, no!" Seiya objected. "Your gun can't—"

"Steinberger is a magical gun passed down in my family for generations," Isuzu interrupted him. "It's vanquished countless monsters and beasts. It's not like a mere bat or a bike chain."

“But...”

“And...” Isuzu loaded the gun. It looked like a front-loading musket, but for some reason it had a lever action rifle port. “The shot I just loaded is an exorcising round that I carry with me just in case,” she reassured them. “It’s different from the bullets I use for punishment. This is the shot I fired at that magician—the creature who once called himself Kurisu Takaya. It should work, even if the specter doesn’t have a physical form.”

《Now, that’s interesting. It does look like a magical gun... But even with a spiritual weapon, you can’t hurt me,》 the specter smirked.

“You can attempt to stop me with a curse if you wish,” she told it. “But I doubt you have the power to stop this magical round!”

“Sento, wait!” Seiya yelled.

“Begone!” Isuzu pulled the trigger, but the gun didn’t fire; it just let out a spark, and went silent.

A misfire? No— Even before his mind could finish the thought, Seiya’s body moved. He ran at Isuzu like a shot. She wasn’t too far away, but it still took about two seconds to reach her. She was looking in confusion at the silent Steinberger in her hands when—

“.....!”

Seiya plowed into her, and knocked the gun out of her hand. The gun burst just before it hit the ground. There was a deafening explosion; shards of wood and metal went flying. The fired gun barrel bounced and flew just past Seiya’s nose.

Seiya, now lying on top of Isuzu, let out a deep sigh. He felt a few small points of pain here and there—some of the shards must have hit him—but none of them felt especially serious. “Sento,” he asked with some concern, “were you hurt?”

“...No. I think I’m... fine,” she told him.



Despite saying this, Isuzu seemed dazed. He looked her over. There were no obvious external injuries, but a magical weapon that she pulled out of her body had been destroyed... It must have done damage to her through some mechanic Seiya didn't quite understand.

《Heh, too bad. Her gun really was powerful... Powerful enough to kill her. A pity you got in the way. I could have tasted even more powerful despair...》

“Damn you...” Seiya stood up again and looked the specter up and down.

He was mad. How long had it been since something had made him this angry? Certainly, he barked at his jabbering subordinates all the time, but the anger he felt now was of a rarer breed.

He must have sensed Seiya's newfound rage, because the specter smiled in delight. 《Well, what are you going to do now? Hit me? Use another cheap weapon? By all means, go ahead. Try whatever you like!》

“Guh...” The specter was right. There was basically nothing that Seiya could do. Seiya was bright, athletic and handsome, but all within mortal levels. He couldn't use superpowers like Moffle and he didn't have a magical weapon like Isuzu.

Fighting back the urge to fly at the creature and strike it, Seiya spoke. “...All right. Let's talk.”

Wait for your chance, he told himself. Wait for it. Just talk to him, and you'll find a toehold somewhere...

“Okay, let's start here: Our goal isn't actually to destroy you,” he told the specter. “We just want you to stop possessing Bando Biino and go somewhere else. Can I assume that's not something you'll agree to?”

《It is not. A host with a soul as strong and healthy as hers doesn't come around every day.》

“So you're possessing Bando Biino because you like her?”

《Of course. This girl—Bando Biino—is a superlative mortal. Her heart is unfazed by suffering and adversity. She never resents those around her and her smile never wavers. One seldom meets a girl like her.》

“I don't understand.”

《Oh?》

“Wouldn't it be easier for you to possess someone with weaker will, someone more pessimistic? ...I agree that Bando Biino has a strong character. It must take a lot of work to break someone like her.”

The specter laughed and stroked Biino's jaw lovingly. 《Heh heh... Kanie Seiya, was it? You seem quite intelligent.》

“Spare me the flattery. Answer the question.”

《There's nothing more delicious than the despair of a mortal like her. Think about it. The despair of someone who'd lose heart over day-to-day melancholy, mundane quarrels with friends... It's entirely commonplace. Don't you agree?》

“Hmm...” Seiya thought.

《You do understand, don't you?》 The specter smiled brightly. It was a smile of triumph, like he'd read Seiya's mind. 《Indeed, it has no value. It's like eating weeds. It sickens me! The sorrows of the weak, their petty internal conflicts... You expect them to satiate a palate like mine? Never! The more sublime the soul that breaks, the greater the pleasure it grants me!》

In other words, the specter was saying that when a strong person like Biino—someone who usually stayed optimistic through hardships large and small—finally broke, the despair would be like ecstasy to him.

《I did so enjoy today. This girl—Bando Biino—has been hanging on by a thread. But she finally reached her limit. She ran off on her own, crying and screaming... how long it has been since I tasted tears so delectable?》

“Hmm...” Seiya had gone beyond anger now. He was remembering something Latifah had once told him. The fairies of this park—the “real cast”—consumed *animus*, which amounted to feelings of mortal delight. Did this specter, then, feed off of “anti-*animus*?” Energy produced not from human joy, but human despair, anger, and other negative emotions? At the least, it sounded similar. Which meant...

“So you're saying you're a connoisseur?” Seiya clarified.

《Heh heh... An accurate expression, mortal.》

“Hm. Which means... which means... Okay.” Sorting through his thoughts at lightning speed, Seiya shot a glare at the specter. “You said before that it sickens you? So it's like getting sick to your stomach after eating some disgusting food... right? So what if someone were to start talking about really trivial, stupid, petty kinds of despair? Would that hurt you?”

It was time to place his bet. He'd used it at exactly the wrong time with Obiza before, but— *It's got to be now!*

He made his decision. Seiya used his grenade. He activated the spell he'd gotten from Latifah: the ability to read someone's mind only once. He had no idea if it would work on this specter or not, but—

He heard it.

—*Oh-ho! He's a sharp one, isn't he? The old man's spell causes me to be affected by all words of power, the specter thought. Their pure despair, anger, and malice—all of it feeds me, and I don't want it mixed with impurities. In other words, mixing animus into it would—*

Seiya ran out of time, and the voice faded out. But... “It's enough.”

A cruel smile appeared on his face.

《Heh. What's enough? I haven't even said anything yet...》

“No, it's more than enough,” Seiya told him. “...Hey, specter. Vomitty Pukington or whatever it was? Not that I care... I'd like to talk about myself for a while. Specifically, about my own life at school...”

《Heh. What are you talking about?》

“Just hear me out. ...You see, I don't have any friends at school. I feel uncomfortable all the time. You know how it is... I really hate people seeing me like that... so I go into the men's bathroom...”

As he spoke, Seiya wanted to start crying. But at the same time, he could sense a troubled, shaken element forming in the spirit's composed face, and that filled him with an incredible feeling of joy. *Yes, it's just as I thought*, he observed. *No doubt about it*. These kinds of stories were the ones this specter hated most.

《...Stop it.》

“...I go into the men's bathroom, and I eat my lunch alone in a stall. And... I'm sorry to get a little crude, but I eat curry bread a lot,” Seiya admitted. “Curry bread in the toilet stall... It could make you cry, right? But I just have to eat it. Try to imagine it. The feeling of that cold curry on your tongue...”

《Stop it.》

“Then as if it couldn't get any worse, sometimes someone enters the stall next to mine to do their actual business. They'll be considerate with the flushes and such... but I can still hear the sounds. Imagine eating curry bread while listening to those sounds. You can, can't you?” Seiya said, digging deep.

《Stop it...》

“Of course, sometimes you get a real monster who shouts out, ‘Hey, I think someone's eating curry bread in the bathroom! Gyahahaha!’ and such. I've had toilet paper thrown at me. Mops, too. ...I think that's pretty close to true despair. Don't you agree?”

《Stop it!》

Yes! It's working. It's working! Seiya thought exultantly. *But that's about all a handsome, omni-talented person like me has to offer... I need a way to do more damage to him. What do I do? What should I do?!*

“R-Ron... If that's how we're playing it...” Macaron picked himself up, trembling. His nose was still bleeding in a ghastly sight, but he had overheard Seiya's confession and seemed to realize its effectiveness. “I... I want you to listen to my story, ron. It's a story about... my ex.”

《Stop it!》 He must have anticipated how explosive this was going to be, because the specter's voice lost all of its earlier confidence.

“My ex-wife was a former idol,” Macaron continued. “She was beautiful back then. Still is, you know?”

《Please stop.》

Don't stop, Macaron! Seiya thought.

“Well, she'd tell me a lot about what her life was like when she was in the business,” said Macaron. “She sold herself as a purity-type with long black hair, but the truth was, she was dating five men at the same time.”

That's the way, Macaron! Get him!

《Stop it!!》

“The guitarist of her band, a producer at her agency, an executive at one of her sponsors, etc, etc...”

Go, Macaron, go!

《Stop... Stop!》

“The president of an IT company would even drive her to events in his Porsche. It was incredible. A woman like that, and she actually shook hands with her fans. It was awful, ron. Terrible, ron. ...And by that I mean the cruelty it took her to tell me, the man she married, about all that later on. It was horrible, ron.”

《...Stoooooooooop iiiiiiiit!》 The specter's silhouette dimmed and began to flicker.

“This is true despair, ron. Am I wrong? It's despair, isn't it?”

《Ggghk... hnng!》

It's hurting him! It's hurting him! Seiya thought frantically. *It's really hurting him!*

“Moffu. Looks like it's my turn, fumo!” The specter shrieked as Moffle pulled himself, shaking, to his feet.

《Hrrgh...》

“I don't have a story as bad as Macaron's, but I've been through a few hard times myself, fumo. Maybe I'll tell the story about how the girl I loved for years and years got stolen by a king...”

《S-Stop it! No NTR, please! I can't take it!》

“Moffu. You should try it at least once. It'll screw with your worldview, that's for sure.”

《Help me!》

“Moffu. Drink it down, fumo! The 25 years I spent with her! And the tragic end to it all!” (Content abridged.) “And the hardest part was hearing what they ate every night from the maid! That king ate nothing but zinc-heavy dishes! You know what that means, don't you, fumo?!”

《Graaaaaaaaaaagh!》

“And every time I had an audience, they'd be flirting with each other right in front of me, fumo! Right in *front* of me! Each time made me want to start a coup d'etat and raze the whole city, fumo!”

《Stop it! Please stop! Graaaagh!》 The spirit writhed in agony. Moffle seemed equally agonized, tears flowing from his eyes, but the damage to the specter was far greater.

“...Looks like it’s working, fumo. Okay! Someone pick up after me, fumo!”

“Looks like it’s my turn, mii!” Tiramii declared, leaping to his feet.

《Erk...》 the specter choked out. 《No!..》

“There are all kinds of women in the world, mii!” Tiramii went on. “But I can’t imagine any greater despair than having one send you 100 emails an hour telling you she’s going to kill herself, mii!”

《I don’t want to hear this!》

“You’ve *got* to hear it, mii! Now, hear the obnoxious story of the craziest girl I’ve ever met!” (Content abridged.) “I’ve moved 113 times, mii! Each time she finds me! I get blood-soaked (censored) in my mailbox! It’s despair, isn’t it?! It’s despair, mii!”

《Hrgh... graaaahhhh!》 The story of Tiramii’s old, bad love caused the specter to raise up a henchman-like scream. He sounded like an even more low-ranking henchman than Macaron and Moffle had.

Obiza, who up until then had just been watching quietly, let out a shout of excitement. “Ah-ha... everyone! You’ve... you’ve almost got him in physical form! Endure it, dig deep... use your heads!”

“Then old man, you say something, fumo!”

“What? M-Me?” Obiza stammered.

“You’ve lived a damn long time, haven’t you?! Say something, ron!”

“Give us the pettiest story of them all!” Tiramii agreed.

Obiza looked hesitant. “R-Right... Well, it’s not actually that great...”

“Just confess already!” Seiya yelled at him. They were one blow away, but they had used up all their own stories of despair.

The specter, who seemed wasted away, shoulders heaving, now curled his lips up in a smile. 《Heh heh... t-too bad... You almost had me, but... bwahahahaha!》

But in the face of his seeming triumph, Obiza began to speak, forlornly. “Ah, well... I... I talk about Setsuko-san a lot, you know?”

“Yeah, I remember, mii. She’s your sexy MILF assistant, right?”

“She never really existed,” Obiza confessed sadly. “I made her up in my own mind...”

《Hrrrgh! Hraaagh!》 The specter doubled over, and began to scream.

“I drew pictures of Setsuko-san and even talked to them, but... she never came out of them,” Obiza sighed. “On nights around Christmas, I’d eat my convenience store lunches alone and cry myself to sleep.

But no matter how I cried, no matter how I kissed and hugged her, Setsuko-chan never showed...”

《Gwahh... gwaaah... gwaghaaaaaah!!》 The specter spasmed, as if struck by lightning.

“Hmm... Considerable despair power, fumo.”

“This watching-a-trainwreck feeling... it’s the real deal, ron.”

“Especially the talk of Christmas. That’s dangerous stuff, mii.”

A shiver went through the three of them.

It certainly was powerful. Obiza’s pathetic story of despair caused the specter Vomitty R. McPukington (or whatever his name was; Seiya didn’t care) to take a fatal dose of spiritual damage, which caused him to physically manifest. Smoke rose up from the previously vague, flickering form.

“Great! Now we can do physical damage to him!” Obiza announced. “And... he won’t have any magic power left to curse us!”

《Guh?! I-Impossible!》 said the specter, who was starting to panic. 《How can this be?!》

The group’s eyes lit up in unison.

“Yes! That’s the defeat flag, fumo! When he shouts ‘impossible!’”

“Tiramii! Get him, ron!”

“Mii! Leave it to mii!” Immediately, Tiramii hefted up the collapsed Biino at his side, leaped her away from the specter, then held aloft a remote detonator for his explosives. “Hey, Vomitty R. McPukington III! You’re in the range of the iTRAP, mii! Have a taste of the shaped charges I spent all night preparing!”

《W-Wai—》

“What were you doing while Biino-chan was in the dumps? I bet you were laughing and enjoying yourself, mii! I might be a trash guy, but I don’t get pleasure out of other people’s suffering! In other words, you’re the real garbage here, mii!”

《S-Stop—》

“I won’t stop! Die, mii!”

Click.

The module explosive that Tiramii had prepared launched out from the corner of the stage, tumbling end-over-end, in a perfect arc through the air. A small stabilizer controlled its orientation, and the sensor, which was connected to the iTRAP, detected its time-to-target to the millisecond. The shaped charge detonated.

There was a flash and then an explosion, as thousands of liquid metal jets lashed at the specter from above, tearing its physical body to shreds. Its shriek of terror was drowned out by the park-shaking explosion.

“Ohh... I no longer feel the specter’s presence,” Obiza announced. “It’s gone! You did it!”

“Mii. Dirty fireworks...”

Tiramii whispered with max grittiness, as he tossed aside the detonator switch. He seemed brimming with joy about finally getting to say the phrase, but everyone was so tired—Seiya included—that they couldn’t even bring themselves to groan.



When the thick smoke cleared, they found a single small spider crawling around where the spirit had been.

“...What’s with this spider?” Seiya asked Obiza.

“That’s the specter’s remains,” Obiza answered him. “Well, I suppose that’s what he looked like originally. It only took on that powerful spirit form over the course of many years, spent consuming human despair and misfortune.”

“Hmmm...” Seiya mused.

“Might’ve happened over centuries, even. But he’s powerless, now; completely harmless,” Obiza reassured them. “You could step on him and he couldn’t do anything to stop you.”

“I see. Hey, Bando,” Seiya called out to Bando Biino, who had finally opened her eyes under Tiramii’s care.

“Y-Yes?” the girl replied timidly.

“What should we do with him?” Seiya asked her. “We can kill him if you want, or let him go. It seems like you should be the one to decide.”

On call, Biino tottered forward. She looked down at the spider, which was bravely struggling to escape, and seemed to think the question over. All she had to do was take a step forward and crush him, but she didn’t.

How much pain had this insect caused her in her life? Seiya couldn’t even imagine. And yet...

Biino whispered, as if to smother the fury rising in her chest. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can kill him.” It was an uncertain voice, brimming with pain, but Seiya felt like he liked Biino now even more than before. Even Tiramii’s button eyes welled up with tears of emotion.

“You’re going to let him go, then?” Seiya asked her.

“No, I won’t do that either... I don’t want him to make trouble for someone else in the future,” she said. “Can’t I lock him away somewhere? I don’t mind taking care of him.”

“Taking care of a spider?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Biino affirmed.

Obiza had suggested that it had taken centuries for the spider to grow into a specter. It probably wouldn’t be an issue for a while, then. “...Very well,” Seiya agreed reluctantly. “Just don’t let him get away.”

“Okay,” said Biino, with a smile of relief. “Thank you, everyone... I mean it.”

“It’s nothing, mii. We’d do anything for you, mii!” Tiramii said, rubbing a finger under his nose. The others averted their eyes and gazed into the distance, as if deciding, “Sure, let’s let him take the glory this time.”

“But... no one at any of my other jobs has ever been so nice to

me,” Biino told them. “I’ll owe you all for the rest of my life!”

“S-Stop it, mii... I’m blushing.”

Biino quietly snuggled up to Tiramii.

“This means you can keep working at our park, right? That’s all that matters to mii.”

“Yes! I’ll do anything I can to help you, Tiramii-san and everyone!” she agreed enthusiastically.

“A-Anything?! What do I say to that, mii? But if it’s true, if it’s true...” Tiramii, red-faced, was just hesitating over whether he should embrace Biino or not, when—

“B-Biino!” a new voice cried out.

“...?” Biino looked around to see who was speaking.

“Mii?”

They looked over and saw a young man in blue pajamas standing nearby. He looked to be in his very late teens. The young man had a slender, handsome face, and his eyes were filled with tears. He looked like he’d escaped from a hospital somewhere: he was wearing sandals, and there were marks for IV drips on his arm.

Who could this be? The whole group furrowed their brows in thought.

“Big brother!” Biino exclaimed, racing towards the young man.

“Mii?” Tiramii bleated. “B-Big brother?”

As the group stood there, stunned, Biino threw her arms around the young man and buried her face in his chest. “Big brother! You’re back in your right mind?”

“I’m sorry, Biino!” her brother apologized. “I... I was in the hospital when suddenly, I returned to my senses! And I realized how... how awful I’ve been to you... I don’t know why, but the hospital discharged me right away! I really don’t understand it... why was I doing those awful things?” Biino and her brother hugged each other tightly.

“It’s okay,” she explained. “The people here removed my curse, and that cured you, too.”

“I see, I see...”

“So you really are back to normal?” she asked.

“Yes. I swear I’ll never hurt you again!”

“Big brother... I love you!”

The others watched this exchange with slackened jaws. Seiya and Moffle exchanged a glance (Isuzu was still passed out), brows furrowed and heads tilted.

“Wait... did she say ‘big brother?’” Seiya wondered. “You think that’s...?”

“Moffu. The big brother from her interview, fumo. The one in the tighty-whiteys with pantyhose over his face, brandishing a chef’s

knife...”

He was the pervert who’d stabbed Biino before her interview, then attacked Seiya and the others before getting knocked out by Moffle’s uppercut. He had appeared here, now, out of the blue, and he was hugging Biino.

“So that really was just part of the curse...” Seiya said faintly.

“I’m more shocked to see how handsome he is now that it’s gone, fumo...”

“They also seem awfully close for siblings...” Seiya noted.

Biino gasped as she realized the others were watching her display of sibling affection. “Ah. I... I’m sorry,” she stuttered. “Please let me make some late introductions. This is my big brother.”

“I-I’m sorry about the trouble I caused you the other day. I’m Biino’s big brother. Thanks for taking care of my sister.” The brother bowed low to them, still in his pajamas. “Also, even though I’m her brother, we’re not related by blood.”

It was quite a bombshell to drop so casually. “M-Mii!” Tiramii reeled backwards, waving his arms around.

“H-Hey...”

“I feel it now! This is true despair, mii!”

“T-Tiramii?!”

“Siblings unrelated by blood! What’s with this eroge—or rather, modern light novel-like development?! I’ve unleashed my own greatest enemy on the world, mii! There’s no way to fight it, mii!”

“Tiramii, calm down.”

“Oh, a curse! A curse upon you all, mii! Despair, despair, despair! I’ll be the specter this time! That’s how much you’ve hurt mii!”

Tiramii seized the former specter—the spider they’d stuck in a bottle—and began shouting at it in rage. “Hey! Vomitty... um... what was it again? Anyway, specter! Heed my call! I’m with you from now on! So be reborn! Be reborn and seduce me with your honeyed words!”

“.....” The spider said nothing. It just crawled around, panicked, in the bottom of its bottle.

“Talk to me! You want some water torture? Will that get you to agree?! Oh, enough! Someone, anyone... I beg you, deliver mii!!” Tiramii’s wails echoed through the space in front of Maple Castle.

And so, Bando Biino’s exorcism ended. Over the next few days, they’d heard that her laid-up father had spontaneously recovered, the landlady who had abused her had returned to her kindly old self, their family’s financial situation had improved, and the mother and brother who had left them would be returning soon. That was all well and good. But thinking about the time frame, it seemed a bit strange that the brother who had been under the curse had come running immediately after the exorcism(?) had completed...

“That’s how these things work. The presence or absence of the curse can affect the flow of events before or after it’s applied or removed,” Obiza said. “If the exorcism had failed, he wouldn’t have appeared. He wouldn’t have gotten permission from the hospital to leave to begin with. That’s just how it works; don’t think about it too hard.”

Having seen quite a few odd magical phenomena already, Seiya decided, indeed, not to pursue the question any further. There were more important matters at hand.

“Hey, Doc. I’d like to ask you something...” Seiya had said to Obiza after the exorcism was over. He might be a half-senile, self-interested old man, but he had, in fact, helped them to remove Biino’s curse. He was stupid and perverted and hard to deal with, but he did have appreciable skill.

“What?” Obiza, who had been making preparations to go back to whatever magical kingdom he’d come from, furrowed his brow when he saw the seriousness on Seiya’s face.

“There’s someone else I’d like you to examine. I suppose you could say she’s an aristocrat...”

Seiya was, of course, referring to Latifah. Latifah was also suffering under the weight of an inscrutable curse— a different kind of curse than that specter’s, to be sure. But in the spirit of exhausting every possible avenue, Seiya decided to put the matter to Obiza. Of course, he’d heard that the kingdom of Maple Land had spared no expense trying to help her, and yet they still hadn’t cured Latifah’s curse. Even so, it felt wrong to just give up. If there was any chance at all that Obiza might help, shouldn’t he at least try?

Obiza had agreed, and so Seiya (along with the now-conscious Isuzu) led him to the rooftop garden. Latifah, who had been informed of his coming in advance, seemed a bit troubled about the whole thing, but she bowed to Obiza nevertheless.

“Ah... Doctor,” she greeted him. “I put myself... in your care.”

“Good,” Obiza told her. “Now, take off your panties.”

“O-Of course...” Latifah timidly reached for her skirt’s hem.

Seiya hit him, Isuzu shot him, and they ended up forcing him to stamp a contract saying “I will perform no further sexual harassment while under Maple Land employ” in blood, and at last Obiza was pacified.

“She was actually gonna take ’em off!” he spluttered. “Why did you have to get in my way?!”

“Shut up!!” Seiya snarled.

“You’re no fun at all,” the old man sulked.

And so at last, the ordinary examination could begin. One hour later...

“It’s beyond me,” Obiza said with absolute seriousness after concluding the examination.

“It really is, huh?” Seiya let out a sigh. Isuzu did the same. She had likely also been holding onto hope, no matter how small it might be.

“However,” Obiza added, “I recall reading about similar symptoms, similar wavelengths, in a book long ago. Yes, very long ago... from some distant, now-lost magical realm. If I can find the book, it might help us out, somehow.”

“Really?” Seiya asked,

“Of course, really,” Obiza asserted. “You think I’d lie about that? Of course, I also can’t guarantee it.”

“Please, try to find the book!” Seiya begged.

“Hm... well, if you insist.” Obiza said, backing off a little as Seiya leaned toward him. “But don’t go getting your hopes up. My memory’s fuzzy on this one. It might be easier to make Setsuko-san manifest and become my honest-to-goodness mistress than to cure that princess of yours.”

“I don’t care. We’ll give you anything,” Seiya promised.

“Well, all right. In that case, I might see you again some time.” With that, Obiza left the park behind.

“By the way, Kanie-kun...” Isuzu said, after he cleared up his general work that day.

“What?” he asked.

“I wasn’t able to say it before... Thank you for what you did.”

“...? What do you mean?” Seiya asked.

“During the ritual...” There was a hesitance in Isuzu’s voice.

“Ritual?” he asked.

“Bando-san’s exorcism,” she clarified.

“Oh, right.” He finally remembered: Seiya had risked his life to save Isuzu when the specter had caused her musket to explode.

“Knowing you, I had assumed that you would have left me to my fate,” she commented.

“What an awful thing to say,” Seiya retorted. “I’m a good man; I’ll save a woman when I need to. It’s almost as if you haven’t realized how incredibly amazing I am yet.”

He made it sound so casual that Isuzu’s shoulders slumped. “Yes, I see. I suppose you would say that.”

“Yes, I would.” Seiya puffed his chest out and nodded. “By the way, I’m also the one who figured out how to beat him. I was very, very, very, very, very clear about that to Moffle and the others before, so that should keep them from mouthing off for a while.”

“I’m sure they were extremely upset,” Isuzu replied.

“Of course they were. After all, I am an incredibly talented man,”

Seiya boasted. "It's natural that I would make others jealous."

"I see..."

"You do, do you? Then stop babbling and get back to your secretarial work. That's about all you're good for, after all!" Seiya laughed heartily.

Isuzu couldn't remain silent after that. She pulled her usual musket out from under her skirt and pressed it against Seiya's chest. "It's one thing to be conceited, but enough is enough."

"Whoa, whoa! Hold it! Isn't that the gun that blew up during the ritual?" he demanded. "How can you be pulling it out now?"

"Steinberger is my ancestral weapon, but we have about 50 of them in our family warehouse," she told him.

"And they're all passed down through the generations?"

"It means that I have a great number of spares," Isuzu explained, "So it will be no issue if I stain one of them with your blood."

"Oh, boy. First you thank me, then you threaten me... It's exhausting." Seiya said with a sigh. "Well, I'm tired. If you're going to shoot me, shoot me— I'm going home." Showing no concern for Isuzu's weapon, Seiya began to stride out of the room.

From behind him, Isuzu spoke up. "Kanie-kun..."

"What is it now?"

She seemed about to say something, but then swallowed her words, and at last whispered, weakly. "Nothing... good night."

"Sure. Night." With that alone, Seiya left Isuzu behind.



Let's Film a Promotional Video!

Greetings. I am Tricen, head of the PR department for a theme park in the Tokyo suburbs known as Amagi Brilliant Park. I am also a humble dinosaur mascot who was born in a magical realm called Rexland.

Until last year, my place of business, Amagi Brilliant Park (henceforth referred to as AmaBri) was on the constant verge of closing. But then, a high school student named Kanie Seiya-san appeared in a beam of light, became our new acting manager, and gave us a new lease on life. As the head of the PR department, I spend my days helping Kanie-san with various tasks... though in practice, I mostly end up doing odd jobs.

Now, this year, my beloved AmaBri has been undergoing a variety of renovations, and we currently need to create a PV. That's right, a PV: a promotional video. This one won't just be streamed on the Internet, but also played as a commercial on local Kanto UHF stations.

Prior to Golden Week, we also had commercials advertising our new stage show, but the production of those was entirely outsourced. In order to save money, then, this new production has been laid at the feet of the humble Tricen—me. It's an understandable task to give to the head of the PR department, who is also, in fact, the department's only member. (Our park truly is in dire straits.)

At any rate, I applied myself to the task and created the PV. I combined previously recorded footage and public domain music into something that I thought was rather decent. Any kind of masterpiece was beyond me, of course, but I feel that what I made was harmless enough. Unfortunately, the reaction to it was somewhat less than stellar...

"Hmm, how to put it... It's neither good nor bad," Acting Manager Kanie Seiya informed me. "Actually, the overall word I'd use is 'dull.'"

I was in his office on a May afternoon, shortly after having finished the PV's editing. He had watched it, but his expression had been troubled the entire time. He didn't appear to like the video I'd made one bit.

"Ahh. Could you explain what you mean by 'dull'?" I requested.

"It's so generic," Kanie-san explained. "You start with park theme song, show some shots of our most popular attractions, then flash the Amagi Brilliant Park logo over a shot of Maple Castle. Then, you show picturesque, happy families running through the entrance grinning

like fools, followed by short videos of each area...”

“Is that wrong?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s ‘wrong’ exactly. It’s just so textbook... there’s nothing noteworthy about it.”

“Hmm...”

“Well, come on, Tricen. It’s like you converted your own dull personality directly to film.”

“Grr...”

“You see this kind of thing now and then. It technically covers all the basics, but it also makes you yawn,” Kanie-san told me. “It’s hard to point to any particular faults, but if pressed, you’d probably say ‘it’s boring because the person making it is boring.’ That sort of thing.”

“Grrrr!” Kanie-san’s words were truly acrid. Couldn’t he at least attempt to soften the blow? Of course, there was nothing else to be done— That was just the kind of person Kanie-san was; incorrigible and arrogant. He was handsome, intelligent, and multi-talented, but the one thing he couldn’t do was consider his subordinates’ feelings. I had heard that his attitude had left him friendless at school, a fact which did not surprise me in the least.

“Well, Kanie-san... I, the humble Tricen, so lack instincts about how to make a good video that I do not even know what I do not know. If I am to improve it, I must have more concrete feedback.”

“I guess you would... but still, I’m busy. I don’t have time to hold your hand through the process. Hmm, maybe... Hey, Sento?! Are you around?” Kanie-san called to the secretary desk, which lay beyond a cheap partition.

“You don’t have to yell; I can hear you. What is it?” His secretary, Sento Isuzu-san, appeared. She was a beautiful woman—curvy, with large breasts, and hair held in a tight ponytail. Utterly magnificent! I, the humble Tricen, am forced to hunch with awe every time I saw her.

“Help Tricen out with this, would you?” Kanie-san requested of her. “The PV, I mean.”

“...If you insist, but I’m afraid I don’t know anything about videos, either.”

“It’s better than leaving it all up to him. You can also hit up other employees for their opinions, and I’ll do the final checks.”

“But...” she said.

“Just get to it already!” Forcing the conversation to an end, Kanie-san went back to his paperwork. He lost himself in a thick stack of English-language documents. How dare he prefer to read those annoying things! What a deviant he was!

Isuzu-san and I moved to the PR department’s office, which was located in the same building, to discuss. The topic was: “ways to improve the PV.” Although to be honest, I had a feeling that it was

just fine as it was...

"As I mentioned before, I also know nothing about making videos," Isuzu-san said, her expression a blank. She rarely showed any kind of emotion. When sexually harassed by the park's mascots, she often got angry and half-killed them, but she spent most of her time stonefaced, like this.

"I don't know what's wrong with the PV," she continued, "but it's true that it feels less than inspiring. I believe Kanie-kun is right that we should ask other employees for their opinions and try to incorporate them."

"Hmm, I suppose. They are entertainers, after all," I concluded. "...In that case, whose opinion should we seek first?"

"Let's see..." She appeared to deliberate, then put a finger to her shapely lips. Her typical expressionlessness made the occasional adorable mannerism even more irresistible. I was forced to hunch over from the outrageousness of it.

"What are you staring at?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I said quickly.

"..... Anyway, we should hear the opinion of the headliner mascot first."

"Do you mean Moffle-san?" I asked her.

Isuzu-san nodded silently.

"Hmm. It's no good, fumo." Moffle-san said after we showed him the PV backstage. Isuzu-san had secretarial work to attend to, so I, Tricen, had come here by myself. "It's so... generic? Which isn't as uncommon as all that... it's the kind of thing that technically covers all the bases, but still makes you yawn. You have to assume the person making it has a boring personality, which—" He was saying all the same things that Kanie-san had said. It was quite injurious.

Incidentally, Moffle-san is the headliner mascot here at AmaBri. He is a soft and plushy superdeformed rodent, resembling a wombat or a capybara. He's also the Fairy of Sweets and a long-time park veteran.

Ah, perhaps this requires further explanation.

Moffle-san is not a person inside a costume. The same goes for all the mascots working here (myself included)— We are genuine fairies, who have come to the mortal realm from various magical lands. Moffle also happens to be one of the senior-most fairies working at the park.

"...Well, there's not much more to say, fumo, except that it'll bore the guests as-is. You'd better change it," Moffle-san summarized, after giving an extensive critique of my PV.

"Still... I, the humble Tricen, have no idea about how to make it better. Couldn't you offer me something more concrete?"

“Moffu. Let’s see here...” Moffle-san folded his plush arms and thought. “Ah, I know, fumo. The PV’s too goody-goody. Give it a little more edge, why don’t you?”

“Edge, you say?”

“Moffu. I think what it’s lacking is... action, fumo.”

“Action?”

“That’s right, action. Nobody wants to see happy families, grinning like idiots as they walk around the park, fumo. You’ve got to add a little more grit.”

Ah, of course. It was true that my PV portrayed only kind and polite customers: Children happily riding the merry-go-round; couples in awe as they watched the fireworks...

“Hmm...” I pondered.

“Let’s take these fireworks at the start, fumo. The couples look happy, sure. But by itself, that’s boring. Instead of fireworks, why not show an explosion?”

“A... An explosion, sir?”

“That’s right, with plenty of gasoline. Blam! Then you show a couple running for their lives away from the flame. It’ll be great, fumo. The people will love it.”

What on earth is he talking about? “B-But sir...” I began.

“They’ll love it! You show them speeding through a series of explosions, then at the end, the car they’re in dives off a cliff. They hang in the air, the video stops, and the Amagi Brilliant Park logo slams onto the screen!”

Isn’t that the opening of Seibu Keisatsu? I wondered. Oh, I suppose that’s a gag you young people won’t get... Try searching for it on NicoNico or YouTube.

“But... won’t that put off our regular guests?” I asked.

“It’ll be fine! Just take my word for it and give it a try, fumo. I promise you they’ll love it!” Moffle-san did seem quite sure of himself, and when he insisted like that, I had no way of arguing. As he was the headliner mascot, I didn’t want to take up too much of his time; I simply promised that I would try it, and then left.

The car went flying, backed by a fiery explosion. The scene froze. The Amagi Brilliant Park logo slammed on-screen in a violent font. An aggressive theme song played. Then, it introduced the cast...

With swift footwork and hooks, the mouse mascot dispatched a series of evildoers. 《Blaster Knuckle! Fairy of Sweets, Moffle!》

With precise aim and flashy gunwork, the sheep mascot dispatched a series of evildoers. 《White Feather! Fairy of Sweets, Macaron!》

With a multitude of traps, the Pomeranian mascot dispatched a series of evildoers. 《Stealth Fang! Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii!》

Such were the introductory videos that played.

Incidentally, the “evildoers” in question were all played by members of the park cast, as well. So after the video introducing Moffle-san, it also showed a shot of Moffle-san being shot to death by Macaron-san. It was contradictory, but I had no choice but to power through.

“...What do you think?” I asked Sento Isuzu-san, who was watching the trial video with me. I was referring to the first third, which I’d reworked using public domain footage and the aid of unoccupied cast members.

“Let me see...” Isuzu-san thought for a while.

I, the humble Tricen, was forced to hunch over in anticipation.

“I’m not sure,” she said, “but I think it’s fine.”

“Ah. You do?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she affirmed. “It certainly has impact. Particularly the scene where Moffle coughs up blood and sinks to the ground in slow motion... It’s a well-made scene.”

Ah-ha! I wasn’t expecting to get such a positive review. I, the humble Tricen, felt encouraged. “I am very glad to hear that!” I beamed. “I shall continue to incorporate the opinions of the cast.”

“And as I’ve said before, I know nothing about making videos,” Isuzu-san confessed. “I have a sinking feeling about this that I can’t quite put into words... but still, do your best, Tricen.”

“Yes ma’am!” I told her. “I shall stake my life upon it!”

The next person whose opinion I asked for was the Fairy of Music, Macaron-san. He was Moffle-san’s friend and the second highest ranking member of the park. In Lupin III terms, you might call him “the Jigen.” He was a white, fluffy sheep who had the power to make people happy with music.

“Hmm... mediocre, ron.” Macaron said, after watching the PV in progress.

“Mediocre, you say? In what regard?”

“Well, the action at the start is fine. But the music sucks, ron.”

“Ah, I suppose it does...” I could agree with that, to be sure. I had used public domain songs to save costs, and the resulting BGMs were rather cheap-sounding.

“It feels like what you’d hear playing in a local supermarket,” Macaron criticized. “We really need a greater variety here.”

“...Could you be more precise?”

“First, try some hip-hop,” he told me.

“.....ahh.”

“Make it as aggressive as possible. Puff, mitch, migga... use all the dirty words. That’ll give us cred with youth culture. The customers’ll come beating our doors down, ron!”

“I see...”

“What’re you looking at me like that for?” Macaron demanded. “Now, you need to appeal to seniors, too, which means you need to add some enka. I can give you one with lots of vocal flourish, full of rising passion.”

“I see...”

“Then you need something for the kiddies. Something like anime and tokusatsu... Not one of those out-of-place love songs, but the hitting-people-with-righteous-anger types. The hot-blooded stuff, ron.” Macaron-san seemed confident in his diagnosis, and if the number two mascot of AmaBri said so, then I was hardly one to argue.

“I see. I shall adopt your suggestion, then,” I told him.

There wasn’t much room to mess with the initial action scene, so I decided to use those songs for the middle portion. Originally, I had used gentle BGMs, which were matched to footage of our best attractions in areas like Sorcerer’s Hill and Wild Valley. For instance, for the video introducing Moffle-san’s “House of Sweets,” I had used a charming piccolo theme BGM. But now I used a hip-hop song with lyrics like...

《Yeah, yeah! Fuck the police, fuck the FBI, fuck the GOP! Shut up, you ain’t shit. I’ve got a big cock, like a nuclear missile, it’s standing up tall. I’m screwin’ your bitch, yeah.》

Though I had to admit, this particular song felt less “youth culture,” and more like something with political overtones... It was also awfully vulgar.

Next, for the Macaron’s Music Theater video, I had previously employed a lively bagpipe melody. But now I was using an enka song.

《MaaAAAAaay I kill you, daaarlign... I shall not speak of how you hurt me... Oh, but oooOOOoone more time... aaaAAAAah... reliIIIIlive the SOOOOoorow of... Amagiiii... Rooooooad!》

It certainly had the vocal flourish he had mentioned, but something about playing a song about a tragic adult romance over the child-oriented music theater didn’t seem quite right.

And while I originally had a refined Mozart BGM for Tiramii-san’s Flower Adventure, it was now an anime theme song.

《Burn! Burn! Blazing fire! Burn! Burn! Wings of justice! Sound the bell of battle! Yes, fly high! Raid Combination, Kiing Raaavemaaaan!》

This one was apparently from an anime where five machines called “Ravens” combined to create “King Raveman,” but I knew very little about it. It did seem to me a bit odd to have a song shouting “Burn! Burn!” while advertising the greenery of the Flower Adventure...

“...What do you think?” I asked Sento Isuzu-san, as I showed her

the video again.

"Hmm..." Isuzu-san thought intently after she finished the video. I gulped in anticipation.

"I'm not sure," she finally said, "but I think it's fine."

"Y-You do?" I stammered.

"The original BGM seemed a bit lacking," Isuzu-san said. "It felt like the sort of thing you would hear at a neighborhood supermarket..."

That was exactly what Macaron-san had said.

"Passionate music like this may indeed suit it better," she concluded.

"I am very glad to hear that. I feared that you would scold me..." Indeed, I was forced to hunch over in encouragement.

"I think it's all right. Keep it up," she told me.

"Yes, I shall!"

Having regained my confidence, I headed for my next target: the Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii-san. After Moffle-san and Macaron-san, he was next most popular mascot of the park. He was a superdeformed, fluffy Pomeranian, and he was just as adorable as the other two. I asked Tiramii his opinion.

"Hmm. I think it needs more... libido, mii." Tiramii said, after watching the in-progress video.

"Libido, you say?"

"Yeah, mii. There's nothing about this video that will really hook people. Let's cut to the chase: it needs sex."

"Ahh..." I had forgotten that Tiramii-san was the horniest of AmaBri's lead mascots. He would pursue any woman, no matter who she was, from young girls to grandmothers, from anorexics to binge eaters.

I, on the other hand, am more discerning about my eros. I have a collection of over 1000 AVs, including hard-to-find classics. I even have opinions about Nikkatsu Roman Porno from the 70's. That doesn't stop me from pursuing newer works, of course, and I'm such a regular at a few different shops that the shopkeepers even ask my aid.

Of course, I have much less luck with real-life women.

"I understand the desire for more sex appeal," I told him. "But... this is still a park PV. I'm sure we couldn't include any content that requires censorship..."

"I wasn't talking about going that far, mii. I mean, I'd personally want to see that... but all I meant is that you should make it sexier, mii."

"...Could you be more precise?"

"Miniskirts! Bathing suits! Low angles! ...all within the realms of legality, of course, mii!"

“Hmm... I see!” I finally understood what Tiramii was driving at. Families were important, but it was the fathers who brought the families to the park. Wasn’t part of the point of a PV, then, to seize the hearts of the fathers?

Brilliant! I was forced to hunch over in appreciation of Tiramii-san’s wisdom! When I mentioned that breathlessly to Tiramii-san, he said “Wh-What? R-Right... I guess you would be,” in an uncomfortable tone of voice.

“...Anyway, that’s the kind of PV I’d like to see, mii. Give it your best shot!”

“Yes, sir. But of course, our production budget is limited. We lack the funding to do a video shoot with sexy models.”

“What are you talking about, mii? We’ve got plenty of sexy girls in the park already, mii!”

“Ah, that is true,” I agreed. We had Isuzu-san; Latifah-sama; Muse-san and the elemental girls; the girl group who had just been hired part-time; Ashe-san in finance and a number of the other cast members. Physically, they also covered quite a range, from flat-as-a-board to bouncy-as-can-be. I was concerned, however, that when I told them the nature of the video I wished to film, there was a very good chance that they would attempt to murder me.

“That’s legit, mii...” Tiramii-san said, after I explained my concern. “In that case, let’s dig into my secret recording stash, mii!”

“Ohh?” I inquired.

“Low-angle shots in particular—I’ve got tons of that, mii. Lots of glimpses of things. I’ve got about... umm... about one terabyte? And they’re well-organized with thumbnails, so feel free to use as many as you want, mii.”

The generosity of the gesture! I was forced to hunch over in gratitude.

“Amazing! Tiramii-san, may you be blessed by Libra!” Libra is the name of a goddess, so my declaration did feel a bit like sexual harassment against the divine, but that was hardly my concern. Hallelujah!

...That said, it would prove difficult to use his sexy videos as they were.

That night, I watched many stimulating videos of the female cast, and repeatedly hunched forward and then reeled back with enough force to cause whiplash—but unfortunately, the ones that made the identity of the individuals clear were unusable. (Well, actually, they were *very* usable—just not for the PV).

Even so, I fought valiantly. I whittled them down again and again, leaving only the most crucial parts of the videos in which the individual could not be identified (for instance, close-up shots of a

bottom or bust). Once I had my cuts, to please the fathers of the world, I loaded up the video with public domain “sexy” voices.

Shots of Entrance Square and Maple Castle were followed by a close-up shot of Isuzu-san’s thighs, accompanied by an erotic moan. After the wild rainforests of Wild Valley came a shot of Muse-san’s toned waist, accompanied by a seductive giggle. After a panorama of the Tama Hills view from the great wheel came a shot of Latifah-sama’s slender swimsuit-clad form, particularly the barely clad ass. Of course, it was accompanied by an enticing cry of protest. And I added various other cuts where they were needed.

“What do you think?! Is it a tour de force?” I asked, fists gripped tightly, as Isuzu-san finished her test viewing.

She tilted her head, arms folded. “...Is this what you wanted?”

“Yes!!!”

“If it’s there to add sex appeal for male customers... I can’t complain about that. I would be lying if I said I don’t feel a slight sense of repulsion,” she admitted. “But if this is what they like, then I suppose we don’t have a choice.”

It seemed she understood; wonderful! I, Tricen, felt tears come to my eyes.

Ignoring my outpouring of emotion, Isuzu-san moved the mouse blankly to check a few other places in the video. “But... this skirt and this swimsuit... I recognize these costumes,” she said suspiciously. “You did say you hired models for this video, didn’t you?”

“Yes! Of course I did!” I said without hesitation. I could not afford to have her doubt me, and so, I lied with all my heart.

“Well, then... all right. But there is something familiar about those thighs...”

“Just your imagination!” I hunched over with insistence. Even the mighty Isuzu-san seemed cowed by my vehemence.

“..... Very well, then. Carry on.”

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

The beautiful woman, though still a bit hesitant about the video that incorporated her thighs and breasts, had given me the go-ahead. The situation by itself was highly stimulating to me. Gross? Yes, but delightful, thank you!

“...But you can’t appeal only to men,” she pointed out. “It lacks balance.”

“Ah?” I was dragged from my ecstasy and cast back down to Earth.

“You should ask for a female opinion, as well. Try seeing what Muse and the others think.”

Isuzu-san’s idea was, of course, correct. The opinions of Moffle-san, Macaron-san, and Tiramii-san—the triumvirate of AmaBri—were

important, to be certain. But even so, they were all men. We could not meet the needs of our diversifying audience with their opinions alone. I had to also consider the female demographic.

Thus, I headed for Aquario, an indoor musical attraction. In short, it featured the elemental spirits of Earth, Water, Fire, and Wind, singing and dancing among beautiful nature sets. It was a relatively new facility, so it had excellent lighting and acoustics, and the show employed quite a bit of wirework, which made it quite impressive.

On top of that, the four stars of Aquario were all beautiful girls, and they wore quite revealing costumes during the show, which meant it topped the charts of the attractions visiting fathers said they wanted to visit again on their surveys. Yes; in other words, the fathers were all forced to hunch over, just as I was (though the mothers' reactions weren't quite as favorable).

And so, I had the girls of Aquario watch the PV. Yes; as expected, their reactions were quite negative.

"Um, this is not... great..." the Spirit of Water, Muse-san, said.

"It's all action and sex..." the Spirit of Wind, Sylphie-san, said.

"It's gross. Utterly sickening. Mind if I tweet about it?" the Spirit of Fire, Salama-san, said.

Hmm. It was insult to injury. Of course I, Tricen, was not above enjoying a bit of injury... In fact, I was eager to receive even more abuse from these beautiful young women.

That said, I still had a job to do. I hunched over with inquiry. "I see. It is clear, then, that something needs to change. ...So, could you tell me what needs to be added?"

"Hmm..." The four of them immediately sank into thought. They had all criticized it quite thoroughly, but they didn't seem to have any particular ideas about how to change it. But just then...

"U-Um..." Spirit of Earth, Kobory-san, raised her hand. She was the shyest of the three, and tended to act very modestly. I, Tricen, found myself curious to hear what she had to say.

"What is it, Kobory-san?" I asked.

"W-Well... I think... maybe..." Kobory-san said timidly.

"Yes?"

"The reason the PV doesn't appeal to us is... because there aren't any men in it. So, you know..."

"Yes?"

"W-Well... I think you could fix it by putting in an equal amount of bare male bodies! Maybe some burly men in tight bikini bottoms! With muscular biceps and pecs...!" It must have taken all of Kobory-san's courage to say what she did.

It took all the strength I had just to let out a stunned "ah" in response, but the elementals of Aquario immediately chimed in, fists

clenched.

“Oh... Yes, that might just do it! I think it would!”



“Yeah... I think I’d enjoy it then.”

“Bikini bottoms... I like. Can I take that viral?”

The Spirits of Water, Wind, and Fire all added their own contributions. Spirit of Earth Kobory-san just smiled, looking relieved.

Now, if I may divert momentarily with a question... How exactly was Kobory-san the Spirit of Earth? She seemed more like she preferred rotting leaves. That is to say, she was a “rotten girl”—a fujoshi.

“Um... yes. I will hunch over and... rather, I will stand upright and consider your opinions.”

Despite what I’d said, I was terrified. My stomach was lurching. I didn’t have the budget to hire male models, you see.

The new video I created was indeed stuffed with biceps and pectoral muscles in critical moments. That’s right; I did insert video of half-naked men with the sexy sounds of giggles, and protests, and such. They were also in bikini bottoms, just as Kobory-san had requested. Tight asses filmed from a low angle— Perhaps most women and 10% of men would find it delightful... but for a heterosexual male such as I, it was a shocking, slightly sickening video. To be frank, it made me want to die.

“...How did you like it?” I asked Isuzu-san after showing her the finished video.

“I don’t quite... know what to say...” Isuzu-san responded, with a twinge of nausea in her voice. “It would be one thing if you used professional bodybuilders, but you also included ordinary people... Ones that are rather old and sickly-looking at that...”

“Yes, well. I suppose I did...” The bodies in the video had pot bellies, exposed ribs, scraggly hair... it was all-in-all a tragic scene.

“Did you really hire models for this?” she asked.

“Yes. No. Er...”

“Tell me right now,” she snapped.

I turned my eyes downward quickly. Even as I began to tell her the truth, I could not completely fight my hesitation. “Er... well... The truth is... I didn’t have the funds to hire models. So... I asked the security staff for aid...”

Yes, I was referring to AmaBri’s meager four-man security department. The (effective) security chief Okuro-san, the 71-year-old Morii-san, the part-time student Arima-san... There was one other part-timer, but I’ve forgotten his name.

Even so, the security trio of Okuro-san, Morii-san, and Arima-san had been willing to literally give the clothes off their backs to help me. Despite their embarrassment, they put on the bikini bottoms and did their best to pose while I filmed them. Their dedication was actually quite moving.

“Incidentally, that ass is the ass of Security Chief Okuro,” I pointed out.

“I didn’t ask,” Isuzu-san said. “I didn’t want to know, either.”

“Yes, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“Couldn’t you at least find someone else to do this?” she asked.

“Surely we have other handsome young men here...”

“We do not,” I denied. “If we do, I’d like to know where to find them.”

“Well...” Isuzu-san started, then hesitated. “...Well, never mind.”

“Were you thinking of Kanie-san?” I inquired.

“Be quiet,” she ordered me.

“Ah. Was I correct? I humbly surmise that I was correct...”

“I told you to be quiet,” Isuzu said, producing a musket from her skirt, as she always did when she got angry. The bullets she fired from that gun hurt very badly when they hit— enough to make a person writhe in agony. Thus, I avoided pursuing the matter any further.

“...Anyway, back to Okuro’s butt. Er, I mean, the PV,” she continued.

“Yes?”

“I’m not necessarily against it. I realize that you’re low on budget and time. What I want to know is: why I should okay this?”

“Ahh, I see.” It seemed Isuzu-san was not yet convinced of the direction the PV was taking.

“I assure you that Kobory-san watched the video, gave a thumbs up and declared it ‘capital-G good!’ The other elemental girls seemed to enjoy it as well,” I told her reassuringly.

“I see. In that case, I suppose it’s all right...” Despite saying this, she seemed less than convinced.

“...Anyway, is this enough?” I asked. “I have asked a number of opinions from employees...”

“I think it’s still missing something,” Isuzu-san said. “We need an opinion from someone closer to the customer point of view.”

“...Could you be more precise?”

“The recently-hired part-timers,” she declared.

At the beginning of April, Kanie-san had hired a number of new employees. He apparently believed that it was impossible for AmaBri to make a comeback while shorthanded. Out of those we ended up hiring, three women in particular had made a strong impression; I decided that I would ask those three for their opinions on the PV. And so that night, I took a few minutes of their time to show each of them the PV.

“I think it’s awesome!” part-time worker Bando Biino said. She was a healthy, energetic girl, always optimistic and truly passionate

about her work. But for some reason, wherever she went, bloodshed always seemed to follow. Apparently, she had even been stabbed by a mentally ill man at her initial interview.

“Explosions! Action! Sex! Butts! It has everything!” she exclaimed. “That shot of Moffle-san spitting up blood while he topples over in slow motion is especially artistic!”

“R-Really?” I asked cautiously.

“So I think you should add in a lot more of that, don’t you?” said Bando Biino. “You know... bloodshed!”

“B-Bloodshed?”

“Yes,” she told me. “Scary things draw the eye, right? So you should add more of that! Put in tons of gore! The guests will love it!”

“Er... Well... Indeed. I’ll consider it.” I was forced to give a noncommittal answer.

“I p-pink it’s a weight TV... I mean, I think it’s a great PV,” part-time worker Chujo Shiina said, flubbing her words. She was an elementary schooler—rather, a high schooler with a nervous disposition. (In my defense, she did look like she was in elementary school.) She had recently played an important role at the debut performance of the big live show on which the park’s future had been riding. Incidentally, she went to the same high school as Kanie-san.

“B-But... But...” Shiina-san seemed to want to say something more. “U-Um... No, actually, it’s nothing...”

“Ah, please, do not be shy,” I told her. “Your answer won’t reflect on your employee evaluation, so please give me your candid opinion.”

“Ah, no! R-Really... it’s nothing!” She was cringing to a pitiful degree, waving her arms. Her face was as red as a beet.

“Hmm. Well, if you say so...” I opted not to question her any further. It was nice to know there was someone so reserved in AmaBri, though. I, Tricen, was forced to hunch over in appreciation.

“I find it a truly wonderful video,” Part-time worker Adachi Eiko-san said, smiling brightly. She was a modestly-dressed college student with a calming air about her. She also had a large bust, and there were rumors that she was a former AV actress. If they were true, I would hunch over with such a speed as to cause my head to hit my crotch, but I had never found anyone resembling her in my database. I’m sure it was simply some kind of misunderstanding.

“Wonderful?” I asked.

“Yes. Of course... as a part-time worker, I do not know if it is my place to say...” She touched a fingertip to her chin, falling deep into thought. Her expression was very serious.

“By all means, continue.”

“All right. Then... if I may be so presumptuous, I believe that this

PV lacks uplift,” she told me.

“Uplift?”

“Yes.”

“.....”

Eiko-san said nothing else, but merely smiled quietly. She seemed unwilling to say more without prompting.

“Er. Ah. If you could give an example of what you mean by ‘uplift,’ it would be very much appreciated...”

“Very well. I enjoy equestrianism, you see.”

“Er?”

“Equestrianism. I simply could not get enough of it as a child.”

“R-Right...”

I had no idea where she was going with her story, but Eiko-san continued on at her own leisurely pace. “The other day, I received an invitation from an instructor friend of mine, and I had the great privilege of watching a horse give birth. She was a gentle mare named Kikuno Scepter, with whom I have been very close since middle school...”

“R-Really...”

“Seeing her go through all that strain to have her child and become a mother... It truly was... uplifting.”

“Ahh.”

“What do you think?” she asked.

Er. Um. How exactly to react to that? A horse giving birth was certainly an uplifting thing, but...



And so, the last third of the PV went like this:

“A-ma-gi! A-ma-gi! Bri, bri, bri! Brilliant! Brilliant Paaaark!” ...was the theme song that played over scenes of shocking gore that I had added, just as Bando Biino had requested.

I had no money and I was feeling desperate, so I simply applied some gore effects to various cast members and filmed scenes of them being knocked down, sent flying, and slaughtered. Tiramii-san lay in a pool of blood, like a murder victim. Macaron-san looked down at his blood-stained hands and cried out “What’s going on here?!” à la Matsuda Yusaku. I recycled the scene of Moffle-san spitting up blood and falling over in slow motion.

Chujo Shiina-san had no request, so nothing to worry about there.

Then there was Adachi Eiko-san’s request(?). She had kindly provided me a video of the foal’s birth. It seemed to be a difficult labor for the horse in question, Kikuno Scepter. The veterinarian and assistants all struggled hard, and in the end, one was forced to plunge both hands into the birth canal and yank the foal out. It slid out with a splut. I fear to say that I did not find it uplifting at all. I found it quite grotesque, in fact.

The theme song continued to play. “Bri, bri, bri! Brilliant park! A magical land! Where dre, dre, dreams are boooorn!” The theme song’s hook played just as the newborn foal splattered onto the ground. It was not dreams we were seeing born here, but a foal encased in blood-stained afterbirth.

I wanted nothing more than to go home at this point, but I still had to do my job. With the new PV complete, and no more changes to make, I unveiled it for Isuzu-san and Kanie-san.

Isuzu-san was silent, and Kanie-san, too, kept his silence for a long time, until...

“What the hell is this?!”

Yes, I had a feeling he would say that. I, Tricen, hunched over in abashment.

“It starts with an explosion out of nowhere, then it’s packed with action, violence, women’s asses, men’s asses... Then you’ve got blood flying everywhere, and it ends with a horse giving birth! Are you people crazy?!”

“Er, well... Please calm down, Kanie-san.”

“Shut up!” he fumed. “And... Sento! I told you to keep an eye on him! How could you let this happen?!”

But Isuzu-san, showing rare tears in the corners of her eyes, was watching the PV again. It must have struck a chord with her, somehow. “It’s... a masterpiece,” she said. “A wonderful PV that will make people dream. What do you propose is wrong with it?”

“Everything!!” Kanie-san exploded.

And so the PV that I had labored over was scrapped, and my original “safe” video was played as a commercial on UHF stations. It was, apparently, quite well received.

But since it really did feel like a waste, I secretly uploaded the version with everyone’s suggestions to a video site. And, well... That one was a massive hit. It immediately reached a million views.

As head of the PR department, I, Tricen, was for once forced not to hunch over— but instead, to hold my head high.

Family Affair

It was Monday. Sento Isuzu went to school for the first time in three days and spent an uneventful morning in class. She had claimed to have a weak constitution, so nobody particularly bothered her about her absences.

It was the rainy season, so her grueling work at the park had hit a lull. Of course, there were various renovations and preparations for summer events yet to be done, but Isuzu intended to take the opportunity to attend class as often as possible.

All that being said, she had no particular attachment to Amagi High School, and she would feel no qualms about quitting if the need arose. Because of her personality, she'd made no real friends among her classmates, and she felt no particular reason to. She was more likely to have lunch with Chujo Shiina, a first-year who had started working part-time at the park.

Like her, Shiina also had socialization problems, and claimed to have no friends at school. But working at the park had helped her with her conversational skills, so she seemed a bit less isolated now than she had been in April. Frequently, when Isuzu peeked into class to invite her to lunch, she would see her engaging in conversation with her peers. That day was one such day.

At lunch, Isuzu strolled by Shiina's class and saw her eating with several classmates. She looked nervous, and didn't seem to be fully enjoying herself, but Isuzu was still unabashedly pleased by Shiina's progress. Deciding it would be rude to invite her under such conditions, she quietly left before Shiina noticed her.

Now, what to do... she wondered.

Her superior, Kanie Seiya, had come to school that day, too. Eating by herself wouldn't be an issue, of course, but she thought that she might as well take a work lunch if it was an option. Isuzu walked up to the staircase to the roof of the southern school building and, as expected, found Seiya sitting alone there, eating curry bread.

"Gwuh?! ...Oh, it's you." Seiya was startled for a moment, but when he realized it was Isuzu, he let out a sigh of relief. It seemed he was still concerned about his reputation— Even though everyone knew that Kanie Seiya had no friends at school.

"No lunch in the bathroom stall today?" she questioned.

"Hmph. I eat here as often as I can," he replied. "It's impossible to relax in a toilet stall." It was an odd thing to say in such an imperious

way; but then, imperious was his default, so she decided that there was no point in commenting on it.

“I’m going to join you,” Isuzu announced.

“Whatever you like,” he told her.

She pulled up a random chair and sat down opposite Seiya. She took a cucumber out of her lunch box, salted it and took a bite. It was a heavenly moment.

“Your lunch is whole cucumbers...” he observed. “Don’t you get malnourished?”

“They’re my favorite. There’s normal food in here too, of course. I’m researching the preparation of various dishes; today I’m trying deep-fried mackerel and broccoli.”

“Hmm? I see...”

“.....” His indifferent response irritated Isuzu a little bit. It was true that she was studying ways to make various bento dishes, but she wasn’t yet at the level where she could boast about her skill. Still, since Seiya always ate curry bread by himself, she had been thinking about making an extra for him, as his secretary. Seeing him respond this way was a blow to her motivation.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she replied shortly. “Anyway, regarding the week’s schedule; did you have any problems with the itinerary I emailed you this weekend?”

“Oh. About that...” Seiya hesitated a minute, then spoke.

“Everything’s fine from tomorrow onward, but could you cancel the plans for today?”

“Cancel them? ...All of them?”

“Yeah. It’s just a conference with Moffle and the others, a few inspections, and some paperwork, right?”

“I’m sure that I can reschedule it... do you have other plans today?” Isuzu was Seiya’s secretary. For the park’s sake, she had to know what he was up to every day.

Seiya’s diligence was one of his several good points, likely something he had picked up from his time as a child star— or, perhaps, it was simply an inborn trait.

At any rate, he never skipped work, and always did his job, even when he was exhausted. It didn’t matter if he wasn’t feeling up to it, or if he had a fever; Seiya never slacked off. He might gripe about it, half-jokingly, but he never seriously complained, even when he obviously wanted to make an excuse and slip away.

This diligence was part of the reason that the members of the park cast continued to respect him, and remained motivated. His intelligence, creativity, and decisiveness about the tough calls—all of that was important too, of course. But it was this attitude, more than

anything, that made Kanie Seiya a leader. Yet now, that same Kanie Seiya wanted to cancel all of his appointments. She found it genuinely shocking.

“Erm... It’s just a small personal errand,” he explained. “I thought today might be flexible, but...”

“It’s true that I can reschedule today’s appointments,” Isuzu confirmed. “Moffle’s having trouble thinking up things for the summer live show; Macaron’s busy with the girls’ band; Tiramii’s working with Kenjuro and the others over plans to open the pool...”

Incidentally, Kenjuro was the cast leader for the park area known as Splash Ocean. He was a dolphin mascot who was serious and wise, and he spoke in old-fashioned samurai style.

“It’s okay, then? All right, please take care of it,” Seiya requested.

“Understood.” She pulled out her smartphone and started writing emails to the cast members in question. While she typed, she casually slipped in a question. “May I ask?”

“About what?”

“About this ‘personal errand.’ Please. As your secretary.” Yes, as his secretary. That was all.

Seiya scowled and waved a hand in annoyance. “Look... it doesn’t matter. It’s not as if I’m going out to have fun. It’s just something I need to get out of the way.”

“I see.” Isuzu, choosing not to pursue the matter any further, sent out emails to the park’s cast canceling the day’s appointments.

Still, she couldn’t help but be curious, as Seiya’s cancellation meant that Isuzu’s own plans were up in the air. She had a backlog of office work to get through, of course, but none of that was urgent, either— She thought perhaps it would be wise to investigate exactly what Kanie Seiya’s “personal errand” was. Purely as his secretary, of course.

And so, after class, Isuzu walked out the front gate as if she was going to commute to the park as usual. But her actual intentions were to follow Seiya wherever he went. Purely as his secretary, *of course*.

At length, Seiya came walking out the gate, looking less than happy, and set out slowly for Amagi Station. Feeling a bit like a secret agent, Isuzu followed after him.

“Um, Isuzu-senpai?” Just as she was passing through the ticket gate, she heard Chujo Shiina address her from behind. Isuzu flinched but tried to remain calm.

“Chujo-san,” said Isuzu, “what a coincidence.”

“It’s not, really... I was just on my way home.”

“I see. That’s right, you don’t have work today, do you?” Shiina didn’t work at the park every day; she usually took Mondays and Tuesdays off.

“Yes,” Shiina agreed. “But is it okay to ask what you’re doing? It looks like you’ve been trailing Kanie-senpai, but...”

“Is that how it appears?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“..... You leave me no choice, then. Allow me to explain the circumstances.”

Isuzu explained, and Shiina understood. “I see. That is a mystery. Given the kind of person he is, it’s hard to imagine him ever needing to do anything that’s not connected to school or the park.”

“I’m glad you understand,” Isuzu said. “So, that’s why I decided to trail him.”

“Okay, I understand. I’ll come with you, then,” Shiina decided.

Isuzu felt a bit flustered by this. “There’s no need to trouble yourself. My motivations are personal—secretarial, rather. As a part-time worker at the park, you’re under no obligation to join me.”

“I’m not troubling myself. I really don’t have anything better to do.”

“Ahh...”

“This is what I do when I don’t have work for the day: I head home and watch some TV, or I do some solo karaoke for vocal practice... Also, from what I saw, you’re pretty bad at tailing people. So I thought I’d come along,” Shiina explained.

As someone who had been in the Maple Land royal guard all her life, it was true Isuzu was bad at tailing people. “That would be helpful. It would be useful to have someone accustomed to living outside of people’s sight lines, like a rat or a cockroach.”

“...Aww. Ahh... Right. ...Well, that’s okay,” Shiina sighed. “That’s the kind of person you are.”

“The train is coming. Let’s go.” Urging on the deeply dissatisfied-looking Shiina, Isuzu rushed towards the city-bound train to which Seiya had been headed.

Seiya got on an inbound train on the Toto Line and rode it all the way to Shinjuku. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to notice the girls tailing him. Shinjuku was, after all, one of the biggest stations in the world, and its crowds were Olympic-class, which made it easy to blend in. They had, of course, had to spend the entire time on the train in the next car down, watching with bated breath to see which station he would get off at.

“Um, Senpai. I... I hardly ever come to Shinjuku,” Shiina told Isuzu. “Will we be okay? Will we make it back alive?”

“You’re in high school, aren’t you?” Isuzu scoffed. “Don’t be so faint-hearted.” She was the one who had insisted on coming along to begin with; she couldn’t start whining now.

“Also, Kanie-senpai didn’t look at his smartphone at all on the

train. Did you notice that? And that Iwanami Bunko paperback... I don't know what it was, but it looked very serious. It was so cool!"

As Shiina noted, Seiya had indeed spent his time on the train gripping the leather strap in one hand, and reading an old, worn paperback in the other. Isuzu had seen the spine; it was by Schopenhauer. "Well... I'm just glad it wasn't Moshidora," she said.

"Aww. But that's a good book, too!" Shiina protested.

"It is," Isuzu agreed. "I've never read it, but it would be upsetting to learn that our park's manager is a paper tiger. That is to say, I'd be worried if he were just reading it now."

"Ahh... yes. I can understand that."

"Let's go."

Fortunately, Seiya didn't seem to realize the girls were tailing him at all. Rather than changing trains at Shinjuku, he left out the West Entrance, wandered around an appliance store, and spent ten minutes in the PC parts section in the basement.

"Senpai seems troubled about something..." Shiina observed.

"That's a graphics card, isn't it? Do you think he's going to buy it?"

"I don't know..." said Isuzu.

Seiya was comparing circuit boards, which were attached to heavy-duty fans, and sighing. He didn't seem like he was going to buy any. Then he moved to the register area and intently checked the prices on memory cards, before glancing at his watch and hurrying towards the exit.

"I guess he wasn't here to buy anything."

"It appears not..."

This was just a detour, then. After leaving the appliance store, Seiya headed away from the station and into the skyscraper district. He entered a relatively squat building (though it was still about 30 stories tall) near the Tokyo Government Office, then stopped in the center of the building's large atrium, and checked his watch against the giant water clock there.

"This is just a normal business building, isn't it?" Shiina asked.

"What could he possibly be doing here?"

"I don't know," Isuzu told her. "...I must say, though, you seem to be talking a great deal more often than before."

"D-Do I?"

In a spot hidden from Seiya's sight lines, they watched him and whispered to each other quietly. It appeared Seiya was waiting for someone. He waited a few more minutes. Then, at last, the person he was meeting arrived.

She was a stylish looking girl whom Isuzu had never seen before. She looked to be around 15 years old. She might have been in middle school, but because she had such a pretty, mature face, she couldn't

say for certain. The girl's expression brightened when she saw Seiya; she ran up to him and linked her arm with his. Seiya seemed to find nothing unnatural about it, and merely shot her a slightly strained smile.

"Uh..."

"Wha..."

Isuzu and Shiina were both stunned. What was going on? Did Kanie Seiya really have a mistress?! Though it wasn't as if he had a wife, so perhaps the term "mistress" was unfair... Still, seeing that girl there dealt Isuzu a massive shock.

"D-D-D-Dhat do de woo?! Thut wuh..." Shiina stuttered. "P-Pensai! Dhat woo de doo!? Don't why no!"

"Speak Japanese," Isuzu ordered.

"Ahh... rorrtsy! Um, er... Is that Kanie-senpai's girlfriend?"

"I don't know. I've never seen her before."

"Ahh... the standard twist in situations like these is that she's his little sister!" Shiina announced brightly. "How about that?"

"Unlikely," said Isuzu, dismissing her theory. "Kanie-kun is an only child. He has no sisters."

"B-But look at how close they're acting! The way she grabbed his arm... And her chest! She's pressing her chest against him! She's a total phore!"

Where did she learn that vulgar Maple Land word? Isuzu wondered. Well, she didn't have to wonder; clearly, it was from those three.

"So, what do we do?" Shiina asked. "Keep tailing them?"

"Of course. It's still possible that she could be a threat to the park — a honey trap sent by Amagi Development, perhaps."

Yes, that must be it. If it came to it, Isuzu would shoot a hail of bullets from the magical gun Steinberger right into a few stomachs; primarily Kanie-kun's.

Seiya and the girl got into an elevator for the building's top floor. They certainly couldn't get on the elevator with them, so they followed in the next one. The top floor was the dining floor, with lines of restaurants and cafes that promised great views of the city skyline.

It took them five minutes of quiet searching before they found them in a stylish Italian restaurant. So as not to be noticed, Isuzu and Shiina entered the restaurant, took up seats on the other side of the pillar from Seiya and the girl, and listened in.

Someone seemed to have taken the seats behind him, but Seiya paid it no mind. It had been a long time, he realized, since he had come to a place like this for a meal.

Since March, he'd spent so much time on the park that he'd had very little time to relax. In the past, from time to time, he would go out shopping by himself, spend some money at the electronics shop,

then browse for a while in the men's clothing section of a department store.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Saki, the girl in front of him, asked with a slight pout. The way she tilted her head caused her loosely styled hair to sway, and her small ear studs to glimmer. The clothing she was wearing was on the flashy side, with an elegant light pink color scheme and a skirt that seemed overly short.

"It's fine," Seiya told her. "I'm just a little on edge." It was true. His only issue was having coffee together on the top floor of a building this tall. Fortunately, they were sitting far enough away from the window that he could endure it, but the trip up, on the glass elevator, had been a complete nightmare.

Saki harrumphed. "Jeez. We finally get to see each other again, and this is how you act? I put a lot of effort into this, you know? Look at these sandals! I bought them last week! Compliment them!"

"Ah. I hope you don't trip and fall." *Why do women spend money on stupid things like sandals and bags?* Seiya wondered. That was about all the feeling he could muster up for them.

"Ugh. And why did you come here in your school uniform? You had time to put on street clothes, didn't you?"

"Oh, street clothes..." Now that she mentioned it, he hadn't worn those in a while. When he went around on park business, he always wore his 30,000 yen suit, and otherwise he was always in either his park manager's uniform or his school uniform.

"Well, what does it matter?" he demanded. "It's not as if I'm on a date with my girlfriend."

"I'm treating it like a date," Saki told him.

"That's your prerogative. Just don't put it on me."

"You're so mean, Seiya-kun. I keep trying to schedule things with you, but you keep saying 'not that day' or 'I have plans!' Most girls would be really mad right now!"

"But I really am busy," Seiya protested. "I have that job that I started in April. It's... a very demanding workplace."

"It's just a part-time job," Saki said. "It's not like it's your whole life. Just what's so demanding about it, anyway?"

"Hmm. It's full of awful people... though, well, they've been improving lately. Right now, it's like the league's worst team trying to rally and win the pennant." Just thinking about it made his stomach churn. Seiya added milk to the coffee he'd been sipping.

"That's just weird. Isn't it an amusement park?"

"Yeah. Backstage stuff."

"Hey, can I go there some time?" Saki asked, all innocence.

Seiya nearly spit out his coffee. "No, you'd better not. No. It's not a nice place. It's full of punks and perverts and I almost died

recently... Anyway, don't go there."

"Aw, but I wanna!"

"No. Now drop it," he ordered.

"Aww. Seiya-kun, you're no fun! You used to take me all kinds of places..."

"That's because I had free time then," he explained. "I don't, now."

"Aww..." Saki didn't criticize him anymore, but switched to gazing silently into the distance. Her earlier air of innocence had vanished; her expression was now mature and melancholy. "I feel like you're drifting away from me..." She let out a small sigh.

Has Saki always been capable of expressions like that? It made Seiya feel a little bit uneasy. "I'm not that far away," he told her. "You live in Meguro; I'm in Amagi. We can see each other any time we want."

"But you don't *want* to. That's the problem..." There was another sigh from Saki. "You know... sometimes I wondered if I should call you 'big brother.' But even though we're family, you don't act like it... so I ended up not calling you that."

"Ahh..."

"And sometimes I think maybe the reason you left was because of something I did..."

"That's not true. It's not true, Saki." Seiya was surprised to hear that Saki felt that way, and he was quick to deny it.

"But the one time I did try calling you big brother, you looked like you hated it," she said.

"Because... I was an only child for such a long time," Seiya explained. "Having a little sister just show up and start calling me that felt weird. It made me uneasy. That's all it is. It's not like you did anything wrong."

"Hmm. I see..." Saki took a bite of her cheesecake. She looked less like she was enjoying a sweet, and more like she was chewing a nutrition bar. "Can I tell Mom?"

"Saori-san?" asked Seiya, feeling perplexed. "About what?"

"About this," Shiina said. "I think she's afraid of the same thing I am."

"Ah... I see. Yeah, I guess she would be."

"I can, then?"

"Yeah. Tell her I'm sorry."

"I wish you'd tell her directly..."

"Well, I might, some day," Seiya told her.

The girl, Kyubu Saki, was Seiya's step-sister; they weren't related by blood. Saki was the daughter of his father, Kyubu Takaharu's, second wife.

They had all lived together for a little while. Step-siblings who had only met post-puberty, especially ones of the opposite sex, generally

didn't form much of a relationship, but Saki had attached herself to Seiya from the start. In the end, Seiya had left home to live with his father's sister Kyubu Aisu, but he still visited with Saki like this now and then.

"Kanie" was his mother's surname. Long ago, his real name had been Kyubu Seiya. He'd had another stage name during his child actor days, but after his sudden retirement, his real name had ended up being leaked onto the Internet. He didn't know who'd done it; there were countless suspects, after all.

So, he'd taken advantage of his parents' divorce to change his name to Kanie Seiya. He had been extremely reluctant to take the name of his mother, with whom he still had bad blood, but he'd really had no other choice.

"But Seiya-kun, you've changed a little," Saki told him.

"...? How so?" Seiya wanted to know.

"You used to be really arrogant and look down on people. But now..." Saki thought. "Hmm, you're still arrogant and looking down on people, I guess."

Seiya deflated. "What in the..."

"Ah, but something really is different," she continued. "Before... you were kind of like an anime villain; you made fun of everyone. You were just totally hostile, all of the time..."

"....." Seiya didn't know what to say.

"Of course, I'm a real idiot, so I never minded when you made fun of me," she told him. "But right now, you're... hmm..." Saki folded her arms and thought. It was unusually hard thinking, for her.

Though, academically speaking, Saki was not especially dumb. If she'd lived in Amagi and put her mind to it, it would have been easy for her to get into Amagi High (which was actually an escalator school).

After apparently reaching her hoped-for conclusion, she clapped her hands together. "I know! Right now, you're more like a... rival character, I guess? You know, like when the villain ends up saving the hero in the middle of the story. And he'll say, 'I'm the only one who's allowed to beat you' to disguise the fact that he's a good person."

"Ahh..." Seiya understood.

"That's what you feel like today," Saki told him. "Is that weird?"

"I couldn't say," he replied.

"By the way, is Aunt Aisu doing okay?"

"That's a very sudden change of subject..." Seiya observed.

Saki had only met Aisu a few times, but for some reason, she seemed to admire her greatly. She'd say "she's so cool" or "I hope I can be like her some day" from time to time. Perhaps a twenty-something woman who worked at a publishing company was an

aspirational figure for a girl like her— even though her subject matter was mahjong manga magazines, something Saki didn't know anything about.

On being asked if his roommate was okay, Seiya suddenly realized he hadn't seen her in almost a week. "Probably," he said.

"Huh?" said Saki. "What do you mean, 'probably'?"

"She comes home on the first train in the morning and heads back to work right after lunch. A lot of days, she doesn't come home at all," Seiya explained. "I only know she's alive from seeing laundry pile up, and the cans of beer in the fridge decrease."

"That can't be healthy," Saki observed. "Maybe I'll make something for her!"

"Can you cook?" Seiya asked.

"No. But I can learn!"

"No need. I'm better."

"Hmph!" Just then, Saki's smartphone buzzed. "Ah, sorry."

"No problem."

She checked the phone, tapped in something brief and sent it right away. It was most likely a LINE. After sending her response, Saki seemed to think about something for a while. Then, hesitantly, she peered at Seiya with upturned eyes. "That was from a guy."

"...I see. So what?" He'd tried to say it casually, but apparently, he'd failed.

Saki smiled mischievously as if seeing right through him. "It was Dad."

"....." She was apparently trying to joke around with him, but Seiya didn't laugh. "That doesn't tell me anything. Which dad?"

"Your dad."

"....." Seiya couldn't stop himself from scowling. Saki was referring to Seiya's biological father, Kyubu Takaharu, as "Dad"— and doing so without any hesitation. He was apparently treating Saki and her mother, Saori-san, very well. Seiya wasn't sure if he'd changed departments or what, but apparently half of the days of the week, he would actually make it back in time for dinner, and even make lively conversation. *Completely unlike how he was with me and Mom.*

Most of my memories of Dad are missed opportunities, neglect, and fleeting glimpses of half-assed fatherhood...

"I thought so," Saki observed.

"Thought so what?"

"Do you hate Dad?"

"No. I just don't care about him." Seiya was extremely annoyed, but he tried not to show it on his face.

He'd probably failed at that, too, because Saki's tone became very careful. "Hey. Um. Dad's said he'd like to see you today, too."

“Ugh...” He hated that he couldn’t say any more than that. *It’s pathetic. What am I, a pouting child?*

“And... Dad said... if you want, we could meet up and get something to eat,” Saki continued cautiously. “Ah, just in case? Just in case... he asked me to ask you.”

“I’ll pass,” Seiya said shortly.

“H-He said he’ll take us somewhere nice. He knows a teppanyaki place, right? It’s not too expensive, but it’s got the most tender meat —”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said no,” Seiya repeated, more forcefully this time.

Saki went silent for a while, but eventually nodded a few times, as if to smooth things over. “R-Right... You’re right. Sorry.”

“Tell him,” Seiya told her.

“Huh? I can do it later...”

“Do it now.”

“Okay...” Saki pecked sluggishly at her smartphone, and Seiya couldn’t bring himself to watch.

He was experiencing a powerful self-loathing. Saki hadn’t done anything wrong, but here he was snapping at her. *I just can’t stand it, he thought. When I made the decision to retire, I was in so much pain. I wanted help so badly, but that man didn’t care. He stayed so focused on his work that I hardly ever saw him. He’d seen Mom striking me, and all he ever did was get a little flustered and say “hey, stop that.” And now he wants to make amends? Is he trying to use Saki to prove that he’s reformed? Yes, he’s using her. He’s even using her! And teppanyaki? Ridiculous. Acting like he’s some rich man...*

No matter how delicious it might be, Seiya told himself, it will never beat those croquettes. Latifah’s croquettes. There’s nothing more delicious than them. They’re our pride. Of course, the croquettes at the shop Moflle took me to were good, too... Teppenyaki, though... A more high-class eating establishment might be worth thinking about. Eating yakisoba and hot dogs all the time isn’t very artistic. Maybe I’ll talk to Sento about that...

Ahh, even now, all I can think about is work. It’s so annoying. ...But how am I going to get those three million people? That’s the real problem that’s got me on the verge of tears...

“...Huh?” Seiya said aloud, as he snapped out of his train of thought. *Why? Why was I so angry just now?* When he thought about the park, he suddenly felt like an idiot for feeling so miserable before.

It’s stupid. It’s so stupid. Seiya realized that family drama, which used to be a relatively high priority in his mind, had fallen to a much, much lower position. *Who cares about Dad? Who cares about Mom? Not me! The park’s future is the most important thing. Three million people! Most men would piss themselves and run in terror if they heard about a*

quota like that! Tomorrow, I'm supposed to meet with the cast, including those three stooges, and have a fight over the budget. I don't have time for this crap!

"...Hmm, sorry!" Seiya tried to say in a neutral tone, as he looked up at the ceiling. He managed it successfully. It had gone so well that he even let out a dry laugh.

Saki's eyes went wide. "Wh-Where did that come from? Are... you going to meet Dad after all?"

"Nope! Absolutely not!" Seiya retorted.

"Huh?"

"I told you, I'm really busy with my job! All I can think about now is work! I don't care about Dad!" This time, when he said 'I don't care,' the nuance was a little different than when he'd said it before. This time, he genuinely didn't care. It felt good not to care!

"...But still, I'm a considerate man," Seiya mused further. "You should probably tell Dad this: Leave me alone." Yes, that was for the best. He couldn't afford to waste time or energy like this.

"Huh? I don't understand what you're talking about!" Saki protested.

"Next up, Saki: This is really a pain in my neck, so next time you want to meet me, come to the park," Seiya told her. "It's full of strange people I don't ever want to introduce you to, but they're my team."

"Team?" Saki questioned.

"Of course, you don't have to meet them," Seiya continued. "The point is, I don't have time to drink coffee in a place with nothing to recommend it but the view!" A waiter who just happened to be passing by then shot him a glare, but Seiya didn't care. He left a 1,000 yen note and a 500 yen coin on the table and stood straight up. "Well, I'm off. I have a mountain of paperwork to clear through."

"Huh? Hey!"

"This has been surprisingly productive. Surprisingly. In that sense, I'm grateful to you," he told his step-sister. "See you!"

"Oh, darn it! Seiya-kun, you're so mean!" Saki kept yelling at him, but Seiya didn't care, and he strode boldly out of the restaurant.

It was all over. Kyubu Saki paid the bill and left, and then at last, Shiina spoke up again. "That sounded like... a pretty heavy conversation." Shiina's tone was heavy, too. "Kanie-senpai seems to have a very complicated family situation. From what I can tell, that girl seems to be his step-sister from a remarriage..."

"Ahh... That's right, he would have a step-sister," Isuzu remembered. When she'd been investigating him before, a girl named Saki had appeared in the documentation. But she hadn't realized that they got together like this, or that they were so friendly with each

other. Isuzu wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or disappointed.

At the same time, she felt guilty. Kanie-kun hadn't been doing anything underhanded, after all. He was just taking a break in his workload to deal with an important family issue. And yet, she had trailed him and eavesdropped on his conversation. She had intruded on an important part of his life.

What was more, in the end, he had declared that park business was more important than those same family issues— At least, he had said something to that effect before he left. *And he called us—despite how miserable we are—his “team.”*

“Isuzu-senpai. Um... are you crying?”

“No, not at all.” Isuzu really wasn't crying. She felt a warmth rising up in her chest and permeating her face, but it hadn't reached the level of tears just yet. But... What was it? Maybe she wouldn't have realized it without Shiina here...

The next morning...

Seiya came to work for the day, and Isuzu met up with him before the meeting in their cheap-looking office room.

He said “hey” to her in his usual way, then as always, he changed into his manager's uniform and tied his tie.

“How did things go yesterday?” she asked.

“Hm?”

“Your errand. Did it go smoothly?”

Seiya didn't seem to notice anything amiss with Isuzu's concern. “Yeah, it was fine.”

“I see.”

Seiya fiddled with his tie in the mirror. Isuzu walked up to him and retied it for him. He held his breath for just a second.

“I think that should do it,” she said.

“R... Right,” he stuttered.

She grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him 180 degrees and slapped him hard on the back.

“Ouch!” he protested. “...What the hell?”

“Let's give it our all again today,” Isuzu told him.

“.....? Sure.”

“Go on, look alive. Seiya-kun.” She pushed him in the direction of the conference room.

Seiya looked suspicious, but accompanied her unsteadily down the hall. “Look alive? I always look alive... But... hey, wait. Did you just call me...”

“We're going to be late to meeting, Seiya-kun,” she said.

“Sei...”

“Is something wrong, Seiya-kun?”

Seiya hesitated for a moment, then offered a strained smile. Then

with a theatrical manner, he said: "Ah, nothing. You're right. Let's go. I'm sure Moffle and the others will give me an earful..."

"That's right," Isuzu agreed. "But I'll defend you."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

So... So let's work hard at this together, Isuzu thought. Because I'll be with you. No matter what happens, I'll fight with you. So, Seiya-kun... I can call you that, can't I?



Five-Man Meeting (At Savage, A Yakitori Bar)

That night was the monthly cast leader get-together. Each of AmaBri's five areas had one cast leader (also known as a CL).

Moffle was the cast leader of the land of "fairy-tale magic," Sorcerer's Hill— in other words, he was the coordinator for the cast group that included Macaron, Tiramii, and Muse.

A cast leader was responsible for keeping an eye on the cast in his area, and maintaining high levels of customer service and performance. They had input on attractions and human resource decisions, and were allowed to advise (read: bitch to) acting manager Kanie Seiya about policy. All in all, the cast leaders played an indispensable role as bridge between the on-site workers and the management. If Moffle and the other four cast leaders ever chose to bond together to rebel, they could effectively bring the park's functioning to a screeching halt.

These so-called (by themselves, at least) Majestic Five were holding a meeting tonight in the yakitori bar Savage near Amagi Station.

"Ahem. Moffu." Moffle cleared his throat. "Well, let's get started. Everyone got your glasses? Let's toast."

"Cheers!"

"A hearty cheers to you all!"

"Heh... cheers."

"....."

With the leisurely air of a drinking party, they clinked their glasses together.

Moffle drank his draft beer down. (He'd been told recently that he could have one beer per night.) He cleared it out in no time, then let out a satisfied sigh. "Takami-chan! Hoppy Black, fumo!"

"Got it!" Takami, the staffer, shouted back from elsewhere in the bar. Tiramii wasn't there today, so there was no fear of anyone harassing her—something he was grateful for.

"Now then, Moffle-dono. What topic dost thou broach this eve?" As the eating and drinking commenced, it was Kenjuro who got down to business first.

Kenjuro, the dolphin, was the cast leader of the area known as Splash Ocean. He was a two-heads(?) -tall dolphin. While on land, he

toddled around on his tail fins, with which he was able to move quite swiftly. He wore two swords on his belt and a small samurai-style helmet on his head. This Warring States Shogun-style dolphin was currently sitting upright in his seat, eating squid shiokara.

“Moffu. Nothing in particular... If I had to name something, it’d be, ‘how are things going lately?’”

“Yea, verily,” Kenjuro replied. “Little hath I to report, however. The pool at our Splash Ocean shall open two weeks hence, and several other water-based attractions will, at last, see renovation... such events proceed apace.”

Kenjuro spoke with tremendous gravity. He came from the magical realm Amatsu Yao, where apparently all the aquatic fairies talked in roughly the same way. But even among them, Kenjuro was especially formal. He had mentioned once before that he came from Amatsu Yao nobility.

“Ah, I see, fumo. Well, summer’s coming up. I wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that our final attendance numbers are riding on how we perform during summer break, fumo.”

“Thy words are well-taken.” As the name might suggest, Splash Ocean’s focus was on water-based attractions. It featured splashdown coasters, pirate adventure shows, mermaid princess romances, Jules Verne-style retro sci-fi undersea rides, and more. “We of the Splash Ocean cast shall put everything into this summer,” Kenjuro promised. “Prithee, be at ease.”

“Ah, sure. Well, I’m not too worried, fumo.”

“If we fail to achieve our required attendance, I, the dolphin Kenjuro, shall slice open my stomach in Latifah-sama’s sight.”

“Er, there’s no need for that,” Moffle told him hastily.

“Ah. You deem such penance insufficient? Then I might stain the pool’s water with the blood of all our cast...”

“No! No ritual suicides, fumo! Just tell me you’ll do your best!”

“Ah, do forgive me. I, Kenjuro, am at times a petty man. Forbearance, I beg of you.” Kenjuro let out a hearty laugh, reminiscent for a moment of an old-time warrior of Satsuma. Moffle had a feeling he was teasing him a little bit.

Despite that, Kenjuro was still the most responsible of the leaders present. He was universally competent, and kept a firm hand on the reins of his subordinates.

In the three months since Kanie Seiya had become acting manager, Splash Ocean had been fairly inactive. It was still the cold season, after all; nobody wanted to do water attractions. But last year, it was Kenjuro’s area’s performance during the summer that had gotten the park to the point where it had only needed one last push to stay alive.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing and things should work out

fine, fumo. We're all counting on you, Kenjuro."

"Well said, Moffle-dono," the dolphin responded modestly.

As Kenjuro responded, someone else interrupted. "Huh?! Moffle-kun, our areas are working hard too!" The interruption had come from the cast leader of AmaBri's Astro City area, Mirai-kun.

"Ahh... Mirai-kun-san. I know you are, fumo."

"Really? I wonder. I know you're buckling down to get serious this year, but..."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, fumo." Moffle bowed down low, careful not to make it look too patronizing.

"But our area pulls good numbers, too, and don't you go forgetting that, okay?"

"Of course, fumo. We're always relying on your ability to bring in guests, Mirai-kun-san."

Mirai-kun was Moffle's senpai; a member of the cast that predated even him. He looked like the Earth. His entire body was just a globe with spindly arms and legs; in effect, you could say he was only one head tall. His map was outdated, though, and if you looked closely it still said "USSR" where Russia should be. His big button eyes sat on Siberia and Canada, and his mouth was in the Pacific Ocean.

Mirai-kun was the cast leader of the Astro City area. His area's attractions were themed around space, sci-fi, and scientific enlightenment. But Mirai-kun's own attraction, Save Z Earth, wasn't popular by any standard.

Save Z Earth. Beyond the obvious question (i.e. why it wasn't "Save the Earth"), it had its origins in the bubble economy-era push to engage with environmental issues and the various dangers that the natural world was facing.

The theme was ecology, and it incorporated cutting-edge video and audio technologies to make its case to the guests. It was quite well made (after a fashion), but it also felt preachy. It was hard to argue that Save Z Earth was meant for children's enjoyment in the first place, and it had undergone very few renovations over the years, meaning the content felt rather old-fashioned and hackneyed now. Worst of all, Mirai-kun himself was an absolute pill.

"Moffle-kun," he was saying, "Is that *really* true? I don't think you've been showing me the proper respect lately."

"Moffu. I wouldn't say that..."

"Don't you understand the importance of my attraction? Don't you realize that the Earth is suffering? We need to communicate that to our guests."

"Yes. Of course you're right, fumo."

"You know who I am, don't you?" Mirai-kun demanded. "What I symbolize?"

This again? Moffle thought, while at the same time steeling himself to give his senpai the answer he knew he wanted. “Moffu. The Earth.”

“That’s right. I am the Earth, Gaia. I know times are hard right now, but you need to be kinder to the Earth. Right?” Despite saying this, Mirai-kun’s attraction was one of the most wasteful in the park in terms of its energy consumption. Save Z Earth used old-fashioned lighting systems and air conditioning. How could someone preach about ecology while wasting electricity like that?

“Yes. You’ve educated me, fumo.”

“Good, good,” Mirai-kun told him. “Now, I’m counting on you and Kanie-kun, all right?”

“Thank you very much, fumo,” Moffle said. Then he thought, *That old windbag. I hope he dies, fumo. Gaia, my eye! Why don’t you whisper to me a bit more? (Whatever that old meme even means.) Go eat a gamma burst, fumo!*

“Moffle-kun, were you just thinking about how you think I’m annoying?” Mirai-kun huffed.

“Perish the thought, fumo.”

“Hmph. Well, I hope not. But you should be kinder to the environment, even so.”

“Yes. I agree, fumo.”

It was around that time that Takami finally brought in the Hoppy with a round of yakitori. Moffle thanked her gratefully and put in another order. Just then...

“I’d like some bourbon, too. The best you’ve got.” The one grittily placing the order was the cast leader of AmaBri’s Wild Valley area, Jack Randy.

Jack Randy; his name was reminiscent of a certain foreign pro baseball player, but he was indeed a member of the AmaBri cast. He looked like a 40-year-old man with five o’clock shadow, wearing a raggedy button-up shirt and fedora. A revolver hung off of his belt. He looked human, in stark contrast to the plush mascots forms of Moffle and the others.

Jack Randy was the protagonist of Tomb Ranger, one of Wild Valley’s attractions. (Tomb Ranger was an adventure movie that had come out a while back.) As the name suggested, the Wild Valley area was all about nature, with exhibits themed after jungles and savannas. It also had a popular attraction about the dinosaurs that had once dominated the Earth, called Planet Dinosaur. (Their current PR head, Tricen, had originally been cast for this area. He still performed there now and again when he had free time, but normally he left his duties to someone in a costume.)

The current cast leader, Jack Randy, was also a long-time park veteran, but he had arrived around the same time as Moffle, so he

wasn't as annoying to deal with as Mirai-kun. Randy was always in-character. Like his character from his source movie (which Moffle hadn't seen), he was always smoking a cigar with a cool expression. He did seem fairly at home doing it, at least.

None of them knew if he was a mortal or a resident of a magical realm—he came from a place they'd never heard of—but he hadn't aged in all the time they'd known him, so he probably wasn't a mortal.

There were a lot of fairies who looked like mortals; Isuzu and Latifah, for example.

Takami responded to Randy's order with a strained smile. "I beg your pardon, sir. This is a yakitori bar. We don't carry bourbon."

"Hmph. Well, I'll have single malt, then. Make it peaty."

"We don't have that either."

"What am I supposed to drink, then? Pick something, honey."

"How about an umeshu sour?" she suggested.

"Fine," Randy declared, "I'll take a double."

"All right. Thank you very much." Takami withdrew, looking perplexed.

"All right, Ran-chan," Moffle said. "How are things with you?"

"Not much to report," Randy told him. "The usual days of adventure." Business as usual, then.

"Seiya's been complaining that you haven't offered any renovation plans, fumo."

"That's 'cause our valley's already pretty new. It's been consistently popular, and nobody wants to change." Despite the area's adventure theming, Moffle couldn't help but notice the way the cast there always liked to play it safe.

"Moffu. Even so, with everyone else bringing their A game, your popularity may suffer by comparison, fumo. I think it's time to start giving it real thought, fumo."

"Hmm. I hear you."

"Do you really hear me, fumo? All right, then..."

"I perform best when the chips are down. Just leave it to me."

Even so, Moffle thought, Randy took an awful lot of sick days when the park's proverbial chips really had been down... "Moffu..."

"Now, how about the big man there? I see he's got his usual poker face on." Randy was talking about Kodain, the cast leader of Etceteland.

Kodain looked like a dogu—a traditional old clay figure, right out of a textbook. He had two large, elliptical eyes, a narrow waist, and short limbs. His body perpetually floated in the air as if it was weightless. He seemed like the kind of boss you'd meet in a bullet hell shooter, spraying huge masses of shots and big fat beams.

“.....” Kodain didn’t move. He just floated there, wordlessly. He had always been the quiet type; Moffle couldn’t recall ever hearing him speak.

“Kodain. How are things going these days, fumo?”

“.....” Kodain didn’t answer. Instead, the round panel on his abdomen just lit up with some kind of blue alien writing.

“I don’t know what that means, but I assume things are fine, fumo?”

“.....” There was no reply.

“M-Moffu... Etceteland doesn’t have much of a concept, so I’m sure running it presents unique challenges... If you need any help, just ask, fumo.”

“.....” Once again, blue alien writing appeared on the panel on his abdomen.

As the name suggested, Etceteland was the place where they put themed attractions and cast members that didn’t quite fit into the other areas. It was home to a lot of experimental projects and shops, and it suffered frequent turnover. Limited-time attractions and outlets for outside franchises were typically found there.

“How’s Nyathan’s store doing these days?” Moffle tried.

“.....” Kodain didn’t answer. He just floated there quietly.

“Moffu. Um... I’ve always wondered, how did you become a cast leader, fumo?”

“.....” Kodain didn’t answer. He just floated there silently.

“Um...”

“.....”

It was exhausting. At any rate, it seemed Etceteland was doing fine, so Moffle decided not to worry.

“Now, now, Moffle-dono. Let us end this talk of business!” The dolphin Kenjuro said, raising his mug. “Tonight is a social occasion. Let it not be consumed anon by talk of labor!”

“Moffu. You’re right, fumo.”

“Now eat, drink, and be merry!” Kenjuro commanded. “The bonds we forge in celebration will bring us to the park’s future!”

“Yeah. I’m drinking, fumo. I’m drinking!”

“Yes, for the sake of the Earth!” Mirai-kun chimed in.

“Heh,” Randy said, “let’s toast to days of adventure. ...Now, where’s my umezake sour?”

“.....” Again, there was nothing from Kodain.

Afterwards, the five of them had a thorough small talk. Baseball, soccer, celebrity scandals; even a little bit about politics.

After a while, they moved on to discuss Seiya’s managerial skills. They all approved, except for Mirai-kun, who still didn’t have a good opinion of Seiya. Well, that was only natural; he was the constantly

disgruntled type.

Eventually, the party broke up with them all feeling pretty relaxed. Splitting the check was customary, but since Kodain had done nothing but float there the entire time, they left him out and split it four ways. Then they walked leisurely to the station and dispersed. It was the same every month.

I could use a little more drinking, though... Moffle thought, and contacted his usual two companions. Unfortunately, Macaron had gone back to the dorm and was about to go to bed, and Tiramii didn't even respond to his email.

Moffu. Might as well forget it for today, then... I'm tired, anyway. Better to just head on home. Humming to himself and just a little bit tipsy, Moffle walked the night road back home.

Afterword

The fourth volume so soon(?). Including other series, I've put out five volumes in a year and a half. Not bad for Gatou the Slow! (Well, I guess I was still pretty slow overall...)

Nothing special to write about this time, so I guess I'll just comment a bit about each episode.

Bando Biino's Extraordinary Circumstances This is an episode about Bando Biino, the girl who would occasionally show up covered in blood.

The story of the various characters' petty despair was originally going to be even more cruel, but my supervisors Morii-kun and Arima-kun said, "It's really graphic and harsh. It'll make the young readers lose all hope" with tears in their eyes, and that made me restrain myself.

The riddle quiz tournament is partially inspired by a feeling I get when I play a certain quiz game on my smartphone on the train. I think you know that feeling— it asks for the name of the wife of some celebrity, and you're like, "how am I supposed to know that?!" Or the name of an Olympic fencer. "How am I supposed to know that stuff?! Don't be ridiculous!" (I say as I pay money to advance).

Let's Film a Promotional Video

As I proceed through the story, I find myself with side characters that I really enjoy. Tricen was initially meant as a bit of a bit player, but I've grown fond of him lately. He finally gets a cover page illustration in volume four, so he's probably hunching over from nervousness.

This story was originally published as a short in Dragon Magazine, and it was meant to introduce readers to the characters of *AmaBri*. But despite that being the intent, I forgot to include Latifah-san. Sorry.

Family Affair.

Biino's story was mainly a comedy of errors, with almost no drama there, so I wanted to write a quieter chapter. It ended up being about Seiya's family situation. But when I thought about it later, I realized that Biino also had a not-related-by-blood sibling. I repeated myself. Sorry.

Five-Man Meeting

We've seen a lot from the three stooges, Tricen and Wrenchy-kun,

but AmaBri is really full of all kinds of fairies(?). I wanted to introduce them and give Moffle a little bar talk that was different from the usual. Incidentally, these cast leaders might be in the anime starting this fall. Watch out for it, okay?

Oh, speaking of the anime! The production company is Kyoto Animation! The director is... Takemoto Yasuhiro, continuing on from *Full Metal Panic? Fumoffu!* About that! It's not a situation like "Oh, Of course... I knew it," or "I'd rather have some new blood!" Right now, Takemossan and I are clashing a lot, passionately! Especially on the question of whether or not Isuzu's bosom will bounce! (I'm in the thinks-it-will camp.)

If you want to learn more about the anime, check the official site!

Book five is scheduled for autumn. I'd better get a move on (sweats).

And to Yuka-sama, thanks for always producing such great illustrations on such a tight schedule. I know it's hard, but let's do our best!

May 2014, Shouji Gatou

Celebrating



It's the release
of volume 4!
Next volume, the "bunny
hunt" attraction begins!
We hope you enjoy it!

Yuka Nakajima

This
is quite
odd, but
I shall
try my
best...

No, I don't
believe it's
on the
agenda

Is this
true,
Ashe?





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by Shouji Gatou

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Amagi Brilliant Park

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